

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

Dr. Richard M. Cromie

Sixty Coconut Row, Palm Beach, Florida 33480

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“WHEN GOOD AND EVIL GROW TOGETHER...”

Text: “Let both grow together until the harvest...”

- Matthew 13:30

When we come to this little known parable of the wheat and tares, we become immediately involved in the eternal question of why there is evil in the world, and more, why the all-powerful God refuses to do anything about it. The first question of the Bible in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was: “How did evil ever arrive into God’s good world?” It is a question which perplexed several of the prophets; they complained out loud to the Lord about it. One by one many of the Biblical heroes struggle with the question in their daily lives and peccadillos. Each of us also, from time to time, a voice to the concern.

I could not possibly try to explain and answer the question in our allotted time together here today, but this parable can give us a framework to begin. The story was told by Jesus, of the good man, a farmer, who planted some good wheat seed in his fields.

In St. Mark’s original version of this parable by the way, the emphasis is different. There a good man scattered seeds upon the field. Then as he went about his business, the seeds sprouted and grew on their own. Jesus adds, “He knows not how.” ...”But when the grain is ripe, at once the man puts in the sickle because the harvest is come.” (Mark 4:26-29) What it means in Mark is that God alone is in charge of the growth of the wheat and of the Kingdom.

But, back to Matthew 13: While the farmer slept that night, one of his enemies came and sowed some weed seeds among the wheat, “So when the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared also.” (13:26) Now the peculiar and pernicious thing about the weeds which the enemy planted, (The old translation called them “tares”) is that at certain times, especially early in the growth of both, the tares and wheat look alike. It is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. (Amateur gardeners also know how difficult it is sometimes to separate young weeds or stray wild flowers from the flowers you plant.)

Professor Barclay tells of a particular weed called “the bearded darnel” which often grew around the Palestinian farms. Even experienced farmers had difficulty knowing which was which, while they were growing. But when the wheat and the tares were ready for harvest, the bearded darnel stood out like a sore thumb. Its grain was slate gray in color, easily spotted. It was also slightly poisonous in aroma, as well as taste. Most farmers waited until the wheat and the tares were harvested and spread out on the threshing floor before they made the final separation. It was easy, or easier, then.

It does not say why the enemy wanted to destroy the farmer’s crop, perhaps it was jealousy, perhaps prejudice, perhaps a fired employee did it. It sounds strange to modern city folk to have someone intentionally plant weeds in your garden, but it was

often done. To this day one of the vilest threats a man can make to his enemy in the Middle East is "I will sow bad seeds in your field." So there! In more subtle ways it happens everywhere, all the time.

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Well, anyway, when it was discovered that the wheat and the weeds were growing side by side, the hired helpers on the farm, puzzled but desiring to be helpful, went to the householder and offered to go out and pull up the weeds?" The owner said: "No, don't do that."

"Don't do that! As you plunder through the field, pulling up the weeds, you will also hurt the good wheat, for by now, the roots are twisted around each other. Be patient. Let both of them grow together, side by side. When the harvest comes, I will take care of it. I will then tell the reapers to gather the tares and bind them into bundles to be burned, but to gather the wheat into my barn." (Matthew 13)

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Most of the time the Gospel records simply leave us on our own to interpret and try to understand and apply the parable. But here, as in a couple of other cases, when they were alone with Jesus, the disciples asked him what the parable meant. They did not understand. We can listen to his answer in Matthew 13:36-43.

Jesus said: "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. The weeds are the sons of the evil one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age; the reapers are the angels."

Now I should alert you that many competent scholars doubt that Jesus ever made this exact explanation to his disciples. That is a dangerous thing to say, I know. But both J. Jermias and C.H. Dodd, two of the best known commentators on the

New Testament parables, indicate that it sounds more like a later allegorical interpretation of the parable, reflecting an advanced eschatology which was not current while Jesus was alive. It does. There are also peculiarities in the language, for example, words used here that Jesus never used anywhere else. Thirty-six particular linguistic characteristics exist in one paragraph.

I say that to alert you who look closely at the Bible with scholarly interests. But, even if added later by a redactor, the concern does not diminish the worth of the explanation. As Professor David Hill writes in his commentary on Matthew: "It is possible that in this passage we have an example of a free adaptation of Jesus' own teaching by someone else...but, in the application, the authentic kernel of the Gospel is not lost. ...The point of the interpretation," Hill continues, is exactly that of the parable itself: Only God himself may distinguish the good from the evil: it is God's business alone to decide who belongs to the Kingdom." (p. 235, The New Century Bible Commentary.)

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But, to return to Jesus' explanation to his disciples: "Just as the weeds are gathered and burned, so will it be at the close of the age." "The evil ones will be burned in the fire ..." "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father." (Verse 43) It is not for us to decide who belongs and who does not. That decision Christ retains for himself.

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Now, from the parable itself, let's look more closely at what it means to us:

(1) First, notice that a good man planted good seed. It was not his fault that the weeds came. We can't stop evil from coming, all we can do is plant good seeds. Good seeds, according to the Bible, are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, etc.," the ones Jesus planted

when he was here upon the earth. Conversely, the seeds of evil are "...strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, envy and the like." (Galatians 5)

Sometimes even in the best of lives things go wrong. In the most Christian of families, a son or daughter can go off the path. Weeds come. Everything does not turn out the way you wanted it to, or thought it would, or should. Parents can do their level best in helping their children, and then, when a child finds trouble, they wonder what more could/should have been done. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

The message is this: When things go wrong in your life, with friends or family, in other relationships, in your work place, in your love, in yourself...it does not mean that you are evil, or that you have done anything wrong. It could be. Examine that aspect, too. But be reassured in where the parable begins: A good man planted good seeds.

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(2) Step Two. While the man and his helpers slept, "An enemy, an evil neighbor, came and planted weeds." Now I am tempted to say that evil can come to the world because good people fall asleep...That does happen. We should be at the ready, all the time. But that is not what Jesus meant. The enemy (the Devil) came and planted the weeds deliberately...a diabolical event, meant to harm the wheat, and the farmer. (It sure hurts when you discover that someone nearby intends evil for you.)

I don't know if you believe in a little red devil with a pitchfork and long tail. Maybe he is that...maybe not. But whatever he is, the power for evil in this world, and in our lives, is overwhelming. Maybe you are a little more sophisticated, and you tend to think that the devil stands for the embodiment of evil in the world, elusive but real. In either case, run from it (him) every time you see it, or feel it

near. You can avoid a lot of trouble by refusing to go near in the first place.

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I don't have to remind you that there is a battle going on in the world today, a battle for the minds and souls of young people, old people, and all the rest in between. It is a battle against goodness. There can be little doubt that the enemy are fully equipped and fully engaged. And, "The only thing that has to happen," Edmund Burke wrote, "for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing." Oh not literally nothing, just nothing outstanding to protect the good.

There is a battle going on out there, and somebody...a little red guy with a pitchfork, or all of his philosophical nephews and nieces, are planting evil in terms of drugs, and alcohol, and abuse of children, of hatred and prejudice, jealousy, etc. There is evil out there, and it is growing side by side with the good.

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(3) The third step in the parable says: "They are growing up side by side." I tip my hand when I say: "If I were God, I wouldn't do it that way." Like the workers in the parable, I would weed out the bad and keep the good. Solzhenitsyn once said: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could get rid of all the evil people in the world?" (Then only you and I would be left.) Get all the evil people out of here...But, he added: "The problem is, it cannot be done. Evil and good are both inside the heart of each of us!" "Evil," Carl Jung once wrote, "is the shadow side of good."

The larger your strength, the longer is the shadow. For everything you have, you have an opposite of that within you...If you try to throw away the evil in your heart, you will also have to throw away your good. Both are in the same heart. Both, or at least the potential for both, are parading around together all the time. The important thing is, the master told

the servants: "You must be careful, because you will harm the good, while attempting to destroy the evil."

Let me give you a vivid example: In some lives evil and good rotate. Think of the people you know who at a given time, made the worst of it. Sin took them over. They did and said the worst of things. But time can change all that. Give that person time to grow up, to suffer, so much so that he reverses his course, or he is converted and turned around, and...the good begins to dominate. People are capable of change. Ask St. Paul.

You cannot go marauding through the garden whenever you feel like it, tearing out the people and ideas you do not like at the moment. No! If you do, you might be victorious for a while, but in the process you could have weeded out the good, which in time, would have grown up to be a dashing beauty, a great success, or a personal help to you.

It says in Corinthians that "God chose the weak in this world to shame the strong, the foolish to shame the wise. God chose what is low and despised...to bring to nothing things that are." (I Corinthians 1:28-29)

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(4) The fourth step reminds us that there is always somebody out there tearing up the evil...."Evil" for them, is defined as "that with which they disagree." Someone is always ready to judge and separate the others. That's why Jesus said, "Judge not that you be not judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get. Why do you see the speck that is in another's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own?" (Matthew 7:1-3) You can hurt the good by trying to tear out the bad. All of life itself belongs together. Let me give you some other examples:

I spoke with a woman some time ago. She was telling me some things I never knew: about how difficult times had been when she was younger, in the family and other places, what they struggled

with and suffered for, how she was hurt... not unlike a story which any one of us could tell in different areas. Life is not a smooth, level, easy road all the time. But to get the good, you have to take the bad. When the conversation was over, she looked at me and summarized: "But you know, Dr. Cromie, the funny thing about it is: I am a stronger person for having faced all that. The hard times in my life have made me what I am. As muscles of the body grow in tension, so the soul grows in struggle. It is true with individuals. It is true with societies. You and I are not always equipped to know the difference...so who or what will you tear out next?"

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(Now, as a corrective, we need to remember that there are obviously some gross injustices in our day, and we have to do something immediate to correct them. Jesus said that, too. But in this parable, he is talking about patience and the long pull.)

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I want to make it personal now, before we leave. There have been times when I would have weeded out some people in my association, among my friends, with those who caused dissention in the church, or community, or those who disagreed or were hard on me. At the time I wished that some members would go to some other church, or at least go away from me. I am over that now (almost). Yet over the years some of my severest critics have become my dearest friends. We grew together.

Then, whisper it... there have been a few times when I would have weeded me out, too; times when I did not know what to do next; times when I ran out of courage; times when I made a fool of myself; times when I disappointed others, times when I felt guilty. I would have weeded me out when I didn't live up to the best I can be... But God in His mercy says: "No, let me do the weeding; let the weeds and tares, the good times and the other times,

grow together. One day the harvest will come. Then it will be clear how it all fits together.”

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(5) For the fifth and final step, the parable suggests that they should grow together until the harvest comes. One of Cromie’s laws says, “Truth eventually emerges.” If it is truth, you do not have to worry about it: truth can take care of itself. God will have His way, no matter what we do.

So, if you are puzzled by a relationship which has failed, or a marriage, or a business association...if someone has betrayed you, and you cannot believe it...if things have gone wrong...if you think back on your life and say: “I never would have believed that person was capable of hurting me!” God knows where you are. Christ knows how to find you. And He will come and get you and make it all clear to you, in His time, not yours.

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The last sentence of His explanation of the parable says it all: when the close of the age finally arrives, “The righteous will shine forth like the sun.” I am not sure what that means in detail. But at least it means that in the end, God will make it right. Meanwhile, there is work to do. You have to keep planting good seeds everywhere you go, never failing an opportunity to share Christ’s love, or offering forgiveness to someone who has wronged you, planting some kindness in the world, turning the other cheek, speaking for fairness and truth.

But meanwhile, try to be patient, you cannot make the seeds grow, however much you try or fret. All we can do is plant them, and pray that God will make the good seeds grow. The evil will still be there, but the good will be there, too, and in the end it will prevail. For now and evermore. Amen.

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