

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Proper 11A + Pentecost 5 + July 23, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 13:24-30:

²⁴He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

What a great text! What a great text to remind you and comfort you about your life as a Christian, to verify what God's Word tells you about the Church in this world. See, unbelievers will come up with all sorts of arguments as to why Christianity is wrong and your faith is in vain – not particularly good or sensible arguments, but arguments all the same. They'll manage to tickle the fancy of your own sinful nature and leave you uncomfortable or worse – *if* you have false expectations about how Christianity and the Church should be until our Lord returns. But with this parable and the explanation that Jesus provides, He showers you with comfort and mercy.

Here's one argument that shows how people have outsmarted themselves on this side of the globe. We're in a very science-based, materialistic society that just doesn't want to admit that religion should have a place in the life of man. It's dismissed as something of the dark ages before man became enlightened and discovered how we can explain everything by means of science and experimentation. That's the part of the world in which we live, one where many argue that God doesn't exist because He can't be scientifically proven. (UFOs, on the other hand, remain a very real possibility! I didn't say it makes sense: the blindness of sin doesn't promise to be consistent.)

At any rate, here's the argument that I've heard more than once: "I tried religion one time, and it didn't work for me. Therefore, Christianity won't work for me, either." In other words, the argument is that "If one religion is false, then all of them must be false." A popular variation is, "If one religion incites violence, then all religions are sources of violence." I find it hard that anybody in our rational age believes this to be a good argument; it is, in fact, so silly that you can impeach it with this little story of a field that Jesus tells. Within the field, there are two kinds of plants – wheat and tares. The wheat produces grain for food, while the tares are noxious weeds that do nothing helpful at all. Let's say that one comes upon this field while hungry, grabs a handful of tares and proceeds to eat. What happens? Nothing good. Now, let's say he makes the argument, "Since these tares are harmful, then all plants are harmful and I henceforth reject the use of grain." Sensible? Not at all. Yet many will settle with this argument to reject Christianity.

The flip-side of this argument, and just as irrational, is the idea that "All religions are equally good and true, just different paths to God." This is really the same argument as before, just dressed up in a more pro-religion disguise. Wheat and tares are both plants, but that doesn't mean that both are

equally good for food. Likewise, Christianity and any other religion (fill in the blank!) are both religions, but that doesn't mean both are equally true and good. And just as this parable speaks of only wheat and tares, there are only two religions in the world: Christianity and religions of law. Only Christianity has the Gospel, where God saves you solely by His sacrifice. Every other religion requires *you* to do the work of salvation. Working your way to heaven is the proclamation of the enemy.

So if you are troubled or uneasy at such arguments, you find comfort in this parable: not all religions are the same. That which is sown by the Lord is what gives life: and the Lord proclaims His salvation to you by His Word that you hear. The presence of false religions doesn't make Christianity wrong: in fact, what else would you expect in a world full of sinners who are trying to find a god apart from Christ?

The next popular argument against Christianity is that Christianity is clearly a farce because congregations are full of sinners and hypocrites, people who are clearly failing to live up to the Word that they claim to hold dear. In this case, we do not deny the assertion: instead, we double down. We gladly agree that *of course* the Church is full of sinners and hypocrites and people who clearly fail to live up to the Word that they claim to hold dear, because the Word says it will always be so. We don't deny this: in fact, we started out the service declaring that we're poor miserable sinners who justly deserve God's wrath and eternal punishment. The point is that, by the grace of God, we freely confess that we are sinners and hypocrites who fail to keep God's Word, and yet (!) we fully expect salvation for the sake of Christ who died in our place. To expect that the Church is full of perfect people is to expect that hospitals should only be full of the perfectly healthy, or restaurants full of people who aren't hungry and don't want to eat anything. Christ came to save sinners, so who else would you expect to find in the Church?

So it's another silly argument. Still, we want to be careful, because Christians have a tendency to lend credence to it in a couple of different ways. There are some Christians who teach that being a Christian means becoming holier and less sinful in this present life as you climb the ladder closer to heaven. If that is the case, then Christians should become more and more perfect. But this simply doesn't happen: Christians sin daily, and sometimes highly-committed Christians fall into terrible sins. To deny this is to open oneself up for legitimate accusations of hypocrisy, because it isn't what the Bible says. We do not teach that Christians become more holy in this life. On the one hand, we acknowledge that we sin daily, and so the life of the Christian is one of daily repentance. On the other hand, we rejoice that for the sake of Christ, our Father in heaven sees us as perfectly holy already.

The other way that Christians lend credence to this argument is when they tolerate obvious sin within the body of Christ. Our Lord gives us the task and responsibility of church discipline for a reason: when a believer sins, we call them to repentance so that they might be forgiven and restored. It is also necessary as a witness to the world, that we take our Lord's Word of Law and Gospel seriously. A congregation that fails to do so and tolerates unrepented sin talks a good game, but fails to walk the walk. In this case once again, the charge of hypocrisy sticks because it is true.

To address all of this, our Lord reminds you in the parable: in this world – and thus within the Church as well, there will always be weeds among the wheat. There will be hypocrites and unbelievers within the Church, and believers sometimes will fall back into unrepentant sin and be condemned unless they repent. Furthermore, it's good to note that the tares in this parable are a kind that look exactly like wheat until they are mature and ready for harvest: likewise, unbelievers can look very much like believers as they sit side by side in the pew. They might look better! That's why you don't base your faith on other people – friends, family or pastors, saying, "I believe in Jesus because they seem so convinced." Anyone can fall away. Instead, you trust in Christ and the Word He gives you, because He will not fall away.

There will always be weeds among the wheat, but this does not change Jesus' faithfulness to you.

Another silly argument is that Christianity is wrong because it advocates violence against its enemies. The "evidence" cited will vary, although the Crusades and Hitler's use of Luther are always popular. There's quite a bit to untangle here, so we'll confine ourselves to some basic observations. First, all sorts of atrocities have been committed in the name of God over time; remember, the Pharisees thought they were glorifying God by having Jesus crucified, and St. Paul imprisoned and killed Christians before his conversion with the same motivation. Just because someone baptizes their sins in the name of Jesus does not mean that the Lord approves; it simply means they're also breaking the first three commandments along with the fifth. Second, we make a distinction between two kingdoms, and we note that God allows a Christian ruler to fight a just war – not because he is a Christian, but because he is a ruler. He does not fight to spread the Gospel, but to defend the innocent. That's his calling. Hypothetically, a soldier who is a Christian could gun down a Muslim terrorist leader: not because he is a Christian killing a Muslim, but because he is the tip of the state's spear in fighting a war to protect innocent non-combatants. But while the Lord entrusts this to the state, He does not give the same responsibility to the Church. Whoever declares that God gives Christians the right to do violence against unbelievers because they do not believe, contradicts the Word of God. The Lord of our parable does not give us a sword of death, but the sword of His Word. We do not kill. We speak. Furthermore, when the servants in the parable want to root out the weeds from among the wheat, the master forbids them. The Lord will take care of such things at the harvest on the Last Day. For now, we live in a world of wheat and weeds.

And we live in the world with the assurance that Christ has died for the weeds, too, that they might hear His Word and believe and be saved. The enemies of the Church are also those for whom Christ has shed His blood, and so we are to speak that saving Gospel to them as well. Christ delights in the death of no one; and neither does His body, the Church.

One more argument against Christianity is this: if Jesus is so great, why is there still evil in the world? This parable gives us as good an answer as our Lord provides anywhere in Scripture: it's not time for the harvest yet. The Day will come when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, and to remove from His kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers. That condemnation is real and on the way. Until then, though, the Lord permits sinners to live so that they might have time to hear His Word and repent; and where there are sinners, there will be sin. This does not prove Jesus feeble, but patient. Do not mistake His compassion for weakness.

Dear friends, the arguments of the world against our Lord and His Gospel are many and varied. They're sometimes boringly recycled, sometimes dressed up in a new outfit with the same old unbelief behind. We do well to answer these arguments – an annoying task because they keep shifting. But in all the changes of this world, here is your comfort. The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man: He is your life and your salvation. Sin and death and devil would have this world be a barren wilderness where nothing good is to be found – where there are only noxious weeds awaiting the burn pile at the harvest. But miraculously, the Church remains. There is still wheat to be found, even if it seems that the field is overrun with tares. You have eternal life against all odds, because the Lord has gone to the cross to make it so. He has watered you with His Word at your baptism so that you might have life in Him. He still tends you with His Word, feeds you with His Supper. Once you were a weed, worthless and worse; now, as one redeemed, you have eternal life and bear fruit in Him. This is not your doing, anymore than any plant can water itself. Christ died to give you life and Christ visits you in His means of grace to preserve that life.

Weeds grow fast, and they spring up all over. When you look at the Lord's Church, you will be tempted to see a field overrun with weeds where little wheat is to be found, and the devil magnifies this to discourage you. But the wheat stands, tended by the Lord who will sustain you until the harvest, when you and all the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of your Father. Unlike the world, you don't judge the effectiveness or truth of Christianity based on the wickedness you see. Instead, you have His Word; and you rejoice in Jesus' bidding when He says, "He who has ears, let him hear." And hearing that

Word, you can rejoice with St. Paul when he says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

So hear this Word and rejoice in this parable. The harvest is coming. In the meantime, the Lord sustains you despite the evil in this world. He will protect you from the enemy by His means of grace, for it is by that forgiveness that He delivers you from sin and death and devil. And when the harvest comes, He will not forget you. He will send His angels to gather you in – He will not leave one stalk of grain on the ground. This is the Lord's will, and for His sake your salvation is sure; because it is His will that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen