

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 67

The Tares and the Wheat

The Kingdom Series Part 6

by Alex Robertson

The second of the seven parables of the kingdom is the parable of the tares and the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). It seems that, as with the first parable, the disciples didn't understand it at all, because once they were alone with Jesus they asked him to tell them what it meant (verse 36). Perhaps it is a good thing they did, for there is enough confusion about these parables even when Jesus has given us the interpretation! The interpretation is in verses 37-43.

Let's remember that in these parables Jesus is telling us about what the kingdom of heaven is like. He is prophesying of the time between his first and his second coming. We can look back now and see how much of it has been fulfilled in history. But these parables happen on another level as well – they happen personally to each of us. We all hear the gospel of the kingdom – the challenge to discipleship – at some time or other in our Christian lives, and we react in one of the four ways Jesus described in the parable of the Sower. If we are not hard-hearted like the stony ground; if the word of discipleship gets some root in our hearts and we survive the opposition that inevitably results; if we overcome the massive obstacle of “the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches” and we bear fruit – then we may think that we have really made it. No further obstacles or deceptions for us! But in fact there is more trouble ahead in the kingdom.

Tares are sown in good soil

The enemy (Satan) comes secretly, “while men slept” – when we are unaware, or spiritually asleep – and sows tares (weeds). Now consider: where does he sow the tares? On the stony path? No. In the shallow soil or the thorny soil? No. He comes to the best soil, where the wheat is thriving and bearing fruit. The eager, open hearts of fruit-bearing Christians are the devil's target. His chief aim is to spoil God's work. If God is working freely in and through you, the devil will target you. How? By trying to deceive you. By seduction. By luring you sweetly and subtly into false doctrines and teachings. This – according to Jesus – is what goes on in the kingdom of heaven! The kingdom isn't a “safe haven”; in fact it's chock-full of deceptions and dangers!

What Jesus is showing us in this parable is the beginning of the enemy's plan. Satan's plan is to deceive Christians with regard to the kingdom. He can't rob them of eternal life, which has been freely given them by grace, but he can deceive them, through false teaching, into missing out on the kingdom and rewards. He can rob them by leading them down a false way, strewn with attractive promises and blessings, all apparently justified by scripture – but this way leads to the counterfeit kingdom of antichrist. One give-away mark of Satan's way is that it is never a narrow way. It's broad, it's lush and green, it's easy, it's full of talk of victory and blessing and growth and prosperity.

Corruption in the church

Historically, we know what happened in the first centuries after Christ. False, deceptive teaching quickly spread corruption through the church. In an attempt to win more converts from the intellectual classes, the church began to incorporate elements of Greek philosophy into the gospel. In an attempt to “take the nations for Christ”, they tried to woo the politicians and gain political power. By the fourth century, Constantine, the first “Christian” emperor of Rome, had a statue of Christ built for himself, to go along with the statue of the sun god and all the other gods he worshipped. Presumably all these things were “acceptable compromises”. There was plenty of growth and plenty of prosperity – but the result was a million miles from what Jesus taught. Seductive false teaching had turned the kingdom into a travesty of the gospel – but it fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy in this parable, which teaches us where the deception begins.

Jesus describes the seeds as people: the good seed are the “children of the kingdom”, but the tares are “children of the wicked one” (verse 38). But the seeds are also “words”, teachings, as in the parable of the Sower. The good seed is “the word of the kingdom” – in which case the bad seed, the seed of the tares, must be the false word of the kingdom, or, to put it another way, the word of the false kingdom – the counterfeit kingdom. The bad seed is Christian teaching about the kingdom of God, but it’s false teaching, twisted and subtly changed. Here we see the full extent of the danger: the true word of the kingdom, the good seed, is sown into the “good soil” of a heart open to Christ, open to challenge, eager and zealous for truth. But that very same disciple’s heart is the target for the false word, the deceptive teaching, the word of the counterfeit kingdom. No wonder Jesus told the disciples he was sending them out “as sheep amongst wolves”, and warned them that they must be “wise as serpents”.

Three characteristics

In the last issue we noted some principles which will help us with the parables. One of them was that the gospel of the kingdom (the Sermon on the Mount) will help us to understand the parables of the kingdom, because the two will always be in line with each other. Let’s apply the principle. There are three characteristics of the tares in the parable. Firstly, they are deceptive. They look like wheat, impossible to tell apart until they are grown. Secondly, only when the fruit appeared did it become apparent what they really were. And thirdly, their destiny is to be burned.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of a group of people who share these three characteristics exactly: the false prophets. “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves” – they are deceptive – “you shall know them by their fruits” – when you see the fruit, it becomes apparent what they are. And Jesus goes on to talk about bad trees not being able to bear good fruit, and concludes that “every tree which does not bear good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire” – their destiny is burning (Matthew 7:15,16,19).

By “prophets” Jesus does not mean people who foretell the future. Prophets are teachers, declaring the word of the Lord – or what they say is the word of the Lord. False teachers are the tares, the wolves who Jesus warned his disciples about. They are also the wolves Paul warned about: “For I know that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also

of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things” (Acts 20:29). If we look at the seven parables historically, Paul lived in the age of the parable of the sower; but he knew that in the generation that followed him, “after my departing”, the tares would be sown among the wheat. He warned Timothy: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils” (1 Timothy 4:1).

Note that Paul describes two categories of people in Acts 20. Firstly, the wolves; secondly, those who arise “of your own selves”. The wolves are the false prophets, the tares, the “children of the wicked one”. Children of the devil are not children of God. The false prophets are not Christians at all. But there are others who are Christians (“of your own selves”) and fall for the deception of the false prophets. These people can become false teachers themselves, and they will lead people into the wrong kingdom and go in there themselves, but they are still Christians, despite their error. Both these categories exist in the kingdom today.

Learn to discern

What are we to do about the presence of these false prophets in the kingdom? Firstly, we have to discern who they are. The false prophets are known “by their fruit”. Fruit is the character of Christ evident in their lives. It is not how many converts they have made, how big their church is, how great their reputation is, how eloquent their preaching is, or how many miracles happen in their meetings. Don’t look at those things. They may have reputation, credentials and large followings. But do they have character of Christ?

But once you have discerned them, what do you do? Should they be eliminated from the kingdom? Jesus says no! When the servants asked the farmer whether the tares should be rooted out, he said, “No, lest while you gather the tares, you uproot the wheat as well. Let both grow together until the harvest” (verses 29-30). The harvest, Jesus tells us, is “the end of the world” (verse 39). The false teachers are to remain in the kingdom, by the command of God, until the return of Christ! Though they are planted by the devil, they have a purpose in the plan of God – whenever they arise, they serve as a test, proving who the true disciples are. Paul understood this: “There must also be heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you” (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Deceived deceivers

So watch out! The false prophets are very subtle. They are deceived deceivers, and the most convincing deceivers are the ones who believe their own lies. The false prophets and their false teachings are among you. You are sheep, and wolves always come to where the sheep are. Wolves love sheep, just like shepherds do – only for very different reasons. Shepherds love and care for the sheep, but wolves love sheep to eat! Wolves are in your churches, on your Christian TV channels, on the shelves in your Christian bookstore. Do you know the false prophets from the shepherds? So many eager, zealous young Christians have been seduced into the prosperity gospel or “Kingdom Now” teaching because they didn’t know how to discern the fruit of what they were taught. Thank God, some find their way out again if they realise that all is not what it should be in the ministers

and ministries they are following. But if they continue in that way, they will end up by missing out on the kingdom. The strong message of this parable is: you must learn to discern!

If you want to know more about the false prophets, get Maurice's tape "Wolves In Sheep's Clothing" (TC54).

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

Rotten Fruit Looks Bad

Maurice and I had been visiting a church for a few months on a regular basis. Some of the members had expressed their gratitude, saying that their eyes had been opened and they had really benefited from the ministry. On the other hand it was clear to Maurice that one of the elders didn't particularly enjoy the challenge that the Sermon on the Mount brought and he knew in his spirit that his days were numbered.

It wasn't long before Maurice and I were approached by the elders of the church who said that they would like a meeting with us in private. They came round to our house and shared with us their concern about certain things we were teaching. We chatted amicably with them for quite some time and did our best to waylay their fears. They had obviously misinterpreted something Maurice had said, but even though he spelt out clearly exactly what he had meant by a particular statement, they still could not be pacified.

Lack of integrity

Soon after this incident, the leader who oversaw the church was brought into it. He was told by the elders what had taken place and immediately came to the conclusion that we were teaching heresy. We were struck off the list of visiting ministers and blacked before the congregation. When we were informed what had happened we tried to make arrangements to speak with this man as he had only heard one side of the story. We knew that this man boasted often about how unafraid he was of confrontation, and never spoke publicly about someone unless he had first spoken to them face to face. We expected that he would see us without hesitation, but for some reason he didn't uphold his integrity, and even though to this day he has a black mark against us and will state categorically that we are teaching heresy, he has never spoken on any matter to us personally.

The man himself has a tremendous ministry. I have quite a library of his teaching tapes and have been very blessed listening to him. He has had great revelation, seeing things from a fresh perspective, and has many followers. But one thing we have noticed about the fruit he bears in others is that those who follow him tend to become very legalistic, hard and bigoted, in fact his

ministry leans towards these people as they find his teaching gives them ammunition to fight other Christians with.

A bewildering time

Some years ago Maurice and I were closely involved with an evangelistic organisation in Holland. They arranged an itinerary around their 13 churches at least twice a year, and opened up their pulpits whenever we were in their area. We had a tremendous relationship with them and had built up some strong friendships. There came a time though when something happened which bewildered and grieved us.

A well known American evangelist had toured Holland and some of the Pastors from the churches belonging to this particular organisation had attended the meetings. They had been really taken up with this American's ministry and had gone out at the end of the meeting to be prayed for by him. They came out of the meeting changed. But in our opinion, not for the better. They began practising the things they had seen this evangelist do and were dissatisfied with how things had been in the organisation. They felt they had been enlightened and had been shown a better way and pulled their congregations in that direction. Not only did they pull their own members, but they infiltrated the whole organisation and caused great division amongst the pastors and workers. So much so that there was an awful tension and power struggle, ending in a massive split. I was there. I saw it. I have never seen anything, in any church, so terrible and vicious.

It was so bad that the whilst the founder of the organisation was preaching in one of his churches on one particular Sunday, the whole congregation booed him and then walked out en masse! He was left alone in the church which had been around 800 strong!

Christians in court

Because the organisation was a faith mission, people worked for a very small wage. They understood what they were doing when they joined the firm, they were doing their work for God, not for material rewards. But when all this situation blew up, and people began to take sides, a couple of the workers actually took their problems to the law courts and sued the organisation for back pay amounting to thousands of guilders. I was stunned that these people, who were still living on the complex in the apartments owned by the organisation, could still hold their heads up righteously when I met them in the streets. It seemed as though they were oblivious of the consequences of their actions. They had become hard-hearted.

The pain this evangelist left in his wake was unbelievable. It's hard to believe that anyone could produce this type of fruit but I personally witnessed it.

Exposed

I know of other churches which have been tragically hurt by their Pastors. A newspaper exposed a minister who was married with a large family by reporting that he had stalked one of the young women attending his church youth club. The woman, in her twenties, was left distressed by his obsession and complained to the police. Consequently he was sacked from his position of Pastor, but has left a hurting church behind him.

Then again, there is another church - a Messianic Fellowship - where the Pastor was extremely well respected and for years preached what his congregation deemed to be sound doctrine. But when he had decided to become circumcised and change his religion to become completely Jewish, the church members had been left in total confusion and the church crumbled. It was a long time before any of the members were able to trust themselves to attend another church as they had totally committed themselves to their former fellowship prior to the leader following another route.

A number of the people who attend the house groups which Maurice and Alex take on various nights of the week are from churches which have had difficulties. These people love God and want to serve him, but somehow find it impossible to do so through the 'church' as the church itself gives them so many problems. One woman who loved her church and was a keen member often spoke out her fears and doubts to her Pastor, rather than judge him in her heart. She felt it the right thing to do to make him aware of the compromising situations he was putting the church in by some of his actions, and advice he was giving. When her Pastor was organising a bus to take all the church on an outing to see "Harry Potter" this proved to be the last straw. Again, rather than think wrong thoughts she went to see him so that she could share her feelings, but he wasn't put out at all and told her if she didn't like it she could find another church, and to "leave them to their perdition"!

Empire-builders

When Maurice and I were in Nigeria last year, Maurice in particular was distressed by stickers he saw displayed in the back windows of quite a number of the cars. The stickers stated that "Givers Never Lack!", yet this statement was being proclaimed from old bangers that were falling to bits on the road. The owners of the vehicles had obviously heard the teaching and seen their role models driving around in fancy cars and living in luxurious surroundings. Even in Nigeria, such a poverty stricken country where there are starving and destitute millions, there are so called Christians who are building empires and encouraging others to give to them so that they in return will receive a financial blessing from God.

But there is nothing that we should do about any of these situations other than watch and take note. Learn to discern. Rotten fruit actually looks, smells and feels bad so you have no excuse for putting it in your mouth. "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of love, power and a SOUND MIND" (2 Timothy 1:7). I honestly believe that only real Christians can think straight and see through the confusion in the church today. The Bible promises that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth. But God is good, those who sincerely want truth will find it.