
Revolutionary Patience

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 20, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I want to talk this morning about the parable of the wheat and the tares. I want to suggest to you that this is one of the most significant passages in the Bible for the way individual Christians and whole denominations have understood their relationship to public life in America in the last century. I also want to suggest that the predominant way the parable has been read rests on a mistake. I want to identify that mistake and describe the beginnings of what a Christian response to evil might look like if the parable were read in a more appropriate way.

The parable of the wheat and the tares tells us that there is real good in the world, and it's there because God put it there. Then it tells us that there is real evil in the world. (The agricultural historians inform us that this darnel, often translated weeds, looks just like wheat, especially in its early growth, but kills wheat through overwhelming its roots.) Then we are presented with the two great questions, the theological one and the ethical one. The theological question is, Where did the evil come from? The story says "An enemy did this." So the evil in the world does not come from God. The Bible in general isn't very interested in the origins or precise nature of evil. We don't discover in this story or elsewhere the character or purposes of God's enemy, but we learn that God for some reason permits evil in the world. But the ethical question is more developed. The ethical question, with which the Bible and this story are very exercised, is, Should we pull the weeds out? The clear and perhaps surprising answer is no – for two reasons. First, there's no way to pull the weeds out without pulling the wheat out too. Second, there's going to be a harvest, and that will be the moment when God will sort everything out.

It's hard to exaggerate the importance of this parable in the twentieth-century history of the churches in America. Before the twentieth century the unique contribution of Christianity to American culture was the notion of final judgement after death, and the offer of everlasting life coupled with the threat of everlasting torment. For various reasons from the mid-nineteenth century people gradually stopped being quite so fixated on the fear of eternal damnation and began to focus rather more on what might be the unique contribution of Christianity to this present life. And in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it seemed the clear answer to that question was love. People talked about the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God and it all fitted with convictions about progress fuelled by Darwin's theory of evolution and the technological breakthroughs of the industrial revolution. But the First World War blew such naiveté out of the water. Here was evil, served up in ghastly doses of mud and slaughter.

And so people turned to look more carefully at the opening verses of this parable and what they have to say about the intertwining of good and evil. Now it seemed that what the churches had to offer the world was not a unique formula for love but a profound and sober understanding of sin and evil. This is the human condition: there is good; and there is evil. And you simply can't expect to meet or experience good without evil being tangled up in it somewhere. In fact evil is never more likely to be present than in people who think of themselves as unambiguously good. It's no use trying to set up some utopian Christian society, because either at worst you'll be humiliated in no time by the reality of the evil you'd tried so hard to ignore, or at best you'll set yourselves apart in a field of wheat and leave the great field of the world to its own destiny. The best you can hope for as a Christian in the world is not to heal evil or to avoid it, but to live amid the reality of good and evil and try to discern amid many flawed and unsatisfactory possibilities the one that expresses and achieves the greatest good and the least evil.

This hugely influential view came to be known as Christian realism. It has dominated what denominations have thought they were doing when they sought to influence public policy on questions such as war and foreign policy and the economy, and has shaped the approach of many, perhaps most, Christians in prominent roles in public life as to what they thought they were doing.

For Christian realists, the parable of the wheat and the tares is essentially a lesson in humility. It takes humility for a church or for an individual to realize that it is itself a cocktail of good and evil. Humility is a huge improvement on the naïveté that supposes evil can be killed with kindness or the arrogance that suggests it's possible to be a person or a community without evil.

It's important to appreciate how attractive it is to read this as a parable about humility. As a human being and a pastor I have a sense of how complicated most people's lives are. We'd love to be self-righteous about food or about finance, but we know our own eating habits aren't exemplary and we have more debt than we'd care to admit. We'd love to hector the world about children's discipline or marital stability, but we fear we're not really in a position to hold up our own parenting skills or domestic bliss as a center of excellence. We'd love to call for more action on poverty or better industrial relations but we wouldn't want our own behavior in these areas to be held up for too much public scrutiny. Humility is a way of making us feel a bit better about our personal failures. We read the beginning of this parable and we see in the field ourselves, a mixture of wheat and weeds.

And it's similar for denominations. Church leaders know their own members are far from shining examples of the values they are calling the whole nation to uphold. And so to avoid being laughed out of the public policy debate as fools or hypocrites the churches have in many instances tried to show just how realistic they could be, just how aware they were that the world, like the field, is a mixture of wheat and weeds. The worst thing would be to pretend that we could all be good. Much better to arrange society so that the unavoidable evil that's always there can't do too much harm.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for humility. But the trouble with this approach is that it only reads the opening scenes of the parable. It sees the description of the world as a place where evil is intertwined with good and then goes straightaway to the point where it acknowledges that it's pointless and foolish to try to form public policy untainted by evil. In no time it ends up largely giving Christian justifications for actions the public policymakers would have embarked on anyway. The one thing everyone seems to agree on in American foreign policy at the moment is that evil must be sought, found, and rooted out. Yet this is the one thing the parable explicitly states is *not* the way of the gospel. It may not be an exaggeration to say that we are living in a country whose current foreign policy is based on a misreading of this parable.

Because if you read the whole of the parable of the wheat and the tares it turns out not to be about humility but about patience. The sting in the story is not at the beginning where we find that the world is a mixture of good and evil. It's not in the question of where the evil came from and why it's there. The sting in the story is when the farmer says "Don't gather up the weeds now. Wait till harvest and they will be gathered up in other ways." The Christian realist reading of the parable, the reading that has predominated for most of the last century, ignores the ending. But the ending is the whole point of the parable. The parable is about how we live in the face of undoubted evil. And all our righteous instincts say we must confront evil, fight with it, root it out and burn it up.

But the parable says there are two things wrong with this approach. First, it doesn't work. You can't clean up the world. If you set about rooting up evil, you root up the good too. There's no such thing as a clinical bombing campaign. There's no way to surgically extract terrorists from a country you've invaded. And second, taking it upon yourself to rid the world of evil shows a lack of faith that that's exactly what God will do at the end of history. We either say to ourselves we don't trust God will do it or we say to ourselves we can't wait that long. Those are exactly the two responses this parable is about. The parable is saying God *will* do it and we should wait because only God *can* do it without doing as much harm as good.

The parable is calling Christians to revolutionary patience. The world is full of people who want to take justice into their own hands and see a field with evil in it and are happy just to slash and burn the whole lot. What the world needs is patient people who believe God's judgement will finally do all the sifting that's necessary and in the meantime are content faithfully to tend the farm knowing that that not everything in the field is wheat.

Jesus told many parables but the real parable is Jesus himself. This is a story about patience, but the patience of God is Jesus himself. In Jesus we see God's patience. Jesus named and encountered the reality of evil from the beginning of his ministry. Think about the story of the temptations. He didn't blow the devil out of the water

there and then. Neither did he hide himself away in a fantasy land of pure wheat. What he did was to maintain a faithful presence in the face of evil, speaking the truth, empowering a community, modelling the fruits of the Spirit, bringing about reconciliation, taking in his own body the cost of witness, and in every way waiting until the time of God's justice would come. No killing the enemy, no rooting out evil, no premature summary action, no naïve attempt to make a field without evil. Instead, revolutionary patience, resting entirely on trust in God's final judgement.

Revolutionary patience. If once what marked out Christians was their belief in judgement, and later what they held dear was a rather naïve ideal of love, and more recently it was their sober perception of the universality of sin and evil, maybe what could mark out Christians today might be their patience. Sure we can see evil in the world. Sure we have access to technology that offers to enable us to seek, identify, root out and destroy evil, and thus make the world a safer place for shopping. Sure we're pretty confident our judgements about who and what are good and evil are straightforward and accurate, and unlike everything else in the world are uniquely unsullied by evil. But we believe the way God deals with evil is not through root and branch expulsion and slash and burn destruction. It's through cross and resurrection. For Jesus was the wheat who took the darnel of the world upon himself and suffered in his own body the judgement of darnel that the world might finally be free of darnel and we may all live in a field of dreams. And so we show our patience in the face of evil by using only those methods that God sanctified in Jesus. That's revolutionary. And our revolutionary patience shows the world not only what we believe really works but that we believe the judgement of evil is finally a matter for God not for us.

It's a commonplace of behavioral psychology that our response in the face of stress primes us towards fight or flight. In the face of evil we either put on the boxing gloves or run from the room. Patience is all about staying in the room. Patience says, "You don't scare me, because I know a force that's deeper, broader, higher and more everlasting than you. But just because I'm not scared of you, that doesn't mean I'm going to try to blow you away. I'm simply going to outlast you. I know there's darnel in this field. But I'm going to water it as if it were all wheat, because the wheat really is good and the wheat really will last, and God will finally deal with the weeds. I'm not going to walk away because it's not all wheat and I'm not going to cut the field down because I can't bear the sight of the weeds. I'm just going to stay here and care for this field. That's all.

If you've ever worked in an organization where something was badly wrong, or been a member of a church where you thought the weeds had taken hold, or if your family life is at least as full of darnel as it is of wheat, then this parable is for you. It tells us not to be cynical: just because evil is real, that doesn't mean good is no longer good. It tells us not to be naïve: there's few if any places or people where you can encounter pure goodness and you shouldn't assume you're going to do so. But most of all it tells us to be patient: the way to address evil is by remaining faithfully present, continuing to tend the wheat, and trusting that God's judgement not only will come, but will offer the only way to disentangle evil from good. It turns out the greatest way we show our faith in the God revealed in Christ may not be our transformatory intervention, but our revolutionary patience.