

Sunday School Lesson
Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43
 by Lorin L. Cranford
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Parable of the Tares



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Quick Links to the Study

I. [Context](#)

- a. [Historical](#)
- b. [Literary](#)

II. [Message](#)

- a. [Planting, vv. 24-25, 36-39a](#)
- b. [Growing, vv. 26-29](#)
- c. [Harvesting, vv. 30, 39b-42](#)

In this first of six studies on the parables of Jesus in the Smyth-Helwys Formations series, we focus on the Parable of the Tares, as it is traditionally called. The text is found in Matthew chapter thirteen, the big chapter of parables that was collected by the Matthean writer and grouped together as a discourse section. Of the eight parables contained in this section, this one is unique to Matthew's gospel. But like the Sower, it also has an explanation section, vv. 36-43, which attempts to interpret the significance of the parable to the smaller circle of Jesus' disciples.

Before getting into the text material, some preliminary treatment of the topic of "parables" is in order, since some additional interpretative steps are necessitated by this distinctive literary form. Some of these are laid out in detail in my [Exegeting Parables](#) page at Cranfordville.com. Four particular areas of analysis become important for correct interpretation of a parable, as explained in this article:

1. DETERMINE THE *TERTIUM COMPARATIONIS* OF THE PARABLE.
2. DETERMINE THE PROPER CLASSIFICATION OF THE PARABLE.
3. DETERMINE THE SITZ IM LEBEN OF THE PARABLE.
4. DETERMINE THE PROPER GROUPING OF THE PARABLE.

These four areas don't necessarily need to be considered in a step 1, 2, 3, 4 sequence, but these aspects do need to be incorporated into the interpretative process. In the treatments below on Context, we will utilize these procedures in analyzing the Parable of the Tares.

I. Context

As is always the case, the historical and literary settings of this passage are critical to legitimate exegesis of a pericope of scripture text.

a. Historical

First is the issue of the compositional history, the **external history**, of the Matthean Gospel. Because we have been studying Matthew's gospel for several studies over the past several weeks, I will simply allude to [one of those lessons](#) for the details, Matt. 3:1-12. Here is the conclusion reached in that study, which also serves as the viewpoint on this topic for this study:

For me, it's better to speak of the Matthean community, without fully assuming the early church tradition, as the source of this document. This divinely inspired document arose out of a desire to defend the belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. Evidently this need was occasioned by the First Jewish War (appx. 66-70 AD), which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and a huge fear among Jewish people for the continuing existence of their way of life and religious heritage. The religious community of mostly Jewish believers, possibly in the Roman province of Syria in either Damascus or Antioch -- or both -- came under strong pressure to abandon their Christian faith in favor of the synagogue tradition of Judaism as a way to help preserve that threatened heritage. God inspired this community -- along with individuals within it -- to produce the

Gospel of Matthew in order to demonstrate just the opposite. In order to be consistent with what God had begun in the Old Testament faithful Jews should accept Jesus as their Messiah, since Christ represented the culmination of the Old Testament revelation and promises for His covenant people.

Regarding the **internal history** of this passage, several considerations need to be given attention. Those are closely connected to the literary setting of the passage as well. Matthew's Gospel sets up a historical setting for this passage that includes 13:1-52. The narrative introduction is verses 1-3a (NRSV:

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying:

Chapter thirteen is paralleled by Mark 4 and Luke 8 in most aspects. Both contain a narrative introduction to their respective collection of parables that Jesus taught:

Mt. 13:1-3a (NRSV)

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying:

Mk. 4:1-2 (NRSV)

1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:

Lk. 8:4 (NRSV)

4 When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable:

(cf. [Lk. 5:1-3](#) for a more exact parallel to Matthew and Mark)

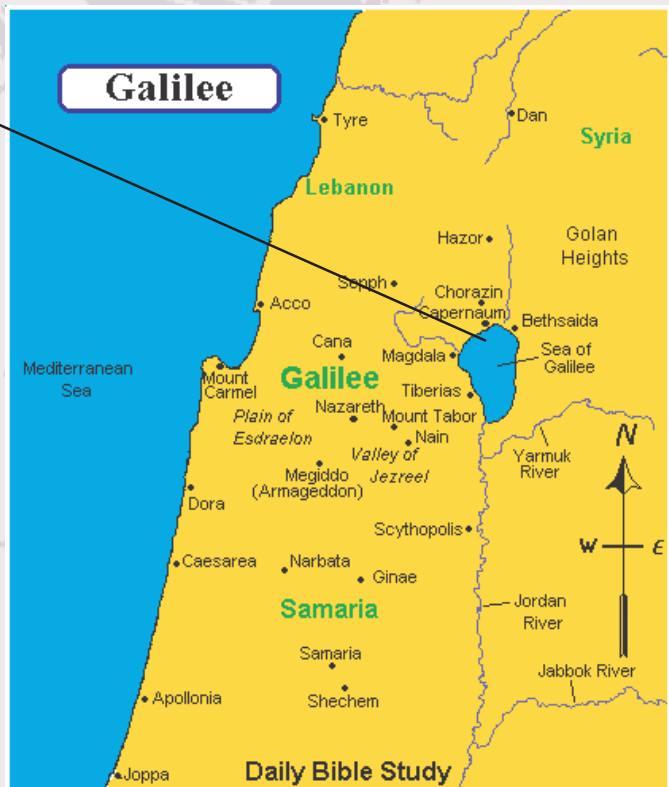
Donald Senior ("Matthew," Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, iPreach) has a helpful summation of the narrative significance of Matt. 13:1-3a:

In the immediately preceding scene Jesus was with his disciples and the crowds in a house and had pointed to his disciples as his true family, as those who did "the will of my Father" (12:46-50). At the beginning of the discourse he leaves the house and sits in a boat along the shore in order to address the great crowds that had gathered on the beach (13:1). As the discourse continues, both the "crowds" (13:34) and the "disciples" (13:10) are present. But in 13:36 Jesus moves away from the crowds and back into the house with his disciples, and the remainder of the discourse appears directed exclusively at them. Thus the overall movement of the discourse is from a general interaction with the crowds to a focus on the disciples alone.



The geographical location for this episode is the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of Palestine, most likely near the town of Capernaum. The chronology of the setting is during the second phase of Jesus' extended ministry in the Roman province of Galilee, where he had been raised since childhood. From the boat, Jesus addressed the large crowds that wanted to hear him speak. As noted above by Donald Senior, the scene shifts from the seashore to a house in [13:36](#) (NRSV): "36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying,..." Although not absolutely certain, it very likely was the house where Jesus had been previously, that is mentioned in 13:1 and [12:46-50](#). What isn't clear is whether or not Jesus had gotten alone with his disciples prior to the reference in 13:36. In 13:10 (NRSV), Matthew says, "Then the disciples came and asked him,

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“Why do you speak to them in parables?” and is paralleled by [Mark 4:10](#) -- “When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.” Matthew seems to de-emphasize the Markan stress on when the disciples were the only audience listening to Jesus, perhaps to stress the explanation of the Parable of the Tares to just the disciples. The Matthean concluding narrative statement terminating this episode is stated clearly in [13:53](#) (NRSV): “When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.” [Mark 4:33-35](#) provides an interpretative base for terminating this episode (NRSV): “33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. 35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’” Matthew made use of the Markan interpretative statement in [13:34-35](#) as he wove it into his narrative earlier in the episode: “34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.’” To be sure, the sequence of events in Matthew differs from that in Mark, as [a comparison of the pericopes](#) reveals:

Matthew	Mark	Luke
79. Teaching in parables 13:1-2	19. Teaching in Parables 4:1-2	46. Parable of the sower 8:4-8
80. Parable of the sower 13:3-9	20. Parable of the sower 4:3-9	47. Purpose of parables 8:9-10
81. Purpose of parables 13:10-17	21. Purpose of parables 4:10-12	48. Parable of the sower explained 8:11-15
82. Parable of the sower explained 13:18-23	22. Parable of the sower explained 4:13-20	49. Candle under a bushel 8:16-18
83. Parable of the tares 13:24-30	23. Candle under a bushel 4:21-25	50. True kinship 8:19-21
84. Parable of the mustard seed 13:31-32	24. Parable of the seed growing secretly 4:26-29	51. Calming the storm 8:22-25
85. Parable of the leaven 13:33	25. Parable of the mustard seed 4:30-32	52. Gadarene demoniac healed 8:26-39
86. Use of parables 13:34-35	26. Use of parables 4:33-34	53. Ruler's daughter and a woman healed 8:40-56
87. Parable of the tares explained 13:36-43	27. Calming the storm 4:35-41	54. Twelve sent out in Galilee 9:1-6
88. Parable of the buried treasure 13:44	28. Gadarene demoniac healed 5:1-20	55. John's death 9:7-9
89. Parable of the costly pearl 13:45-46	29. Ruler's daughter and a woman healed 5:21-43	56. 5,000 fed 9:10-17
90. Parable of the net 13:47-50	30. Rejection at Nazareth 6:1-6	
91. Parable of the householder 13:51-52	31. Twelve sent out into Galilee 6:7-13	
92. Rejection at Nazareth 13:53-58	32. John's death 6:14-29	
93. John's death 14:1-12	33. 5,000 fed 6:30-44	
94. 5,000 fed 14:13-21		

Matthew inserts the [Rejection at Nazareth](#) (#92) as the next episode, while Mark has the [Calming the Storm](#) (#27) as the next episode. Luke pretty much follows the Markan sequence here. This emphasizes the distinctive approach of each gospel writer, and how each made use of his sources, especially how Matthew and Luke made use of Mark as one of their sources.

Most scholars conclude, from such detailed analysis of the gospel texts, that one has great difficulty knowing the precise sequence of events that took place in the life of Jesus. Because of what we note here as but a sampling of the challenges in listing out all the pericopes in all four gospels and then trying to line them up sequentially, the conclusion is widespread and well grounded that one must paint the chronology of Jesus with broad brush strokes, not with fine details. The extreme reaction of a century or more ago (the response to the so-called first quest for the historical Jesus of the late 1800s), that the only conclusion to be reached by a modern historian is that no one knows whether or not Jesus ever lived, is not held by many scholars today. But, on the other side of the spectrum, few will attempt to harmonize the gospel accounts into a detailed Harmony of the Gospels that was popular in the early 1900s. One good internet gateway into several sources for additional study is Mark Goodacre's [New Testament Gateway](#).

b. Literary

The literary aspects of Mt. 13 begin with a consideration of a parable as **a literary form**, i.e. genre. This teaching device was commonly used in the ancient world, especially among Jews. Thus, the use of it by Jesus was not unusual, and would have been a familiar way to communicate religious truth to the Jewish audiences of Jesus' day. The old VBS definition of a parable, “earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” is basically on target but can over simplify the nature of parables as found in the ancient world. At the heart of both the Hebrew term [mashal](#) (משל) and the Greek terms [parabole](#) (παραβολή) and [paroimia](#) (παροιμία) is the idea of comparison. “This is like that” is the foundational formula for what has come to be

called a parable.

The “this” segment refers to the spiritual truth intended by the comparison. In the [Matthean formula introduction](#) to many of Jesus’ parables, the phrase begins “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...” This phrase is equal to the similar phrase “the Kingdom of God is like...”, used by Luke four times in his [collection of parables](#) in Luke 13:18, 19, 20, 21. Both the Greek adjective [homoios](#) (ὁμοίος; “like”) and the Greek verb [homoioo](#) (ὁμοιόω; “compares to”) are used by Matthew and Luke especially to introduce many of the parables.

The central point of all of Jesus’ parables is the [Kingdom of God](#). Although in a few instances this emphasis is indirect rather than stated directly, the theme is still present. Thus any legitimate interpretation of any parable of Jesus will stress some aspect of God’s rule both in this world and in the world to come. One important side note: the Kingdom of God is not the same as the church, either in this world nor the world to come. Such mistaken identification has led to horrible theological distortion of the teachings of Jesus not only in Roman Catholic tradition, but in Protestantism as well. Those who are the saved participate in the Kingdom of God, and only as baptized members of a community of believers. But the two cannot be equated with one another. Hopefully the church is where God’s rule is most evident in this world.

Identifying the particulars of the spiritual side of the comparison is the real challenge, as well as being at the heart of the interpretative process. Modern parable study has affirmed a basic principle called the *tertium comparationis* (point of the comparison); see Step 1 in [Exegeting Parables](#). Early on in the modern era, the tendency was to limit very strictly the boundaries of the essential point of each parable, but more recent work tends to see this essential point as foundational with room for a greater range of possible meanings that can grow off this foundational point. This leads to the next consideration: the ancient levels of meaning given to the parable; see Step 3 in [Exegeting Parables](#). The parable had an initial meaning in the historical situation of Jesus’ teaching (*Sitz im Leben Jesu*). This provided a basis for early Christianity to apply the parable to various situations in the subsequent decades after Jesus’ public ministry (*Sitz im Leben Kirche*). Each gospel writer, writing some thirty to sixty years after Jesus, is going to reflect his own effort at applying the various parables of Jesus to his initially targeted audience. Thus, when the same parable shows up in two or more gospel accounts, one will typically find different details in the parable’s content, as well as differing arrangements of the some of the same details. Since our parable is unique to the Gospel of Matthew, such a comparison is not possible. Therefore the identification of the *Sitz im Leben Kirche* is more difficult, but not impossible.

The “is like” segment implies several things. For one thing, how much detail is provided in the source comparison? Parables come in different lengths; see Step 2 in [Exegeting Parables](#). They range in the ancient world from very short proverbs and sayings to lengthy stories. Modern scholars have grouped these into three categories: a) Parabolic Sayings; b) Simple Parables; c) Narrative Parables. Each category of detail carries with it distinctive traits that are important to the interpretative process. The Parable of the Tares falls in the middle category of length with a fair amount of narrative detail making it more than a mere proverb, but without the lengthy details of a full-fledged story like that of the Prodigal Son.

Typically, especially in the parables of Jesus, the “that” segment comes from some aspect of daily life in ancient Palestine. Identifying the source of that daily life segment is helpful. Most scholars have identified four types of sources of materials for comparison (Step 4 in [Exegeting Parables](#)): a) Nature Parables; b) Discovery Parables; c) Contrast Parables; d) A fortiori Parables. The Parable of the Tares falls under the third grouping as a Contrast Parable, with its emphasis upon the separation of the wheat from the weeds at harvest time. Very important to the interpretative process then is the exploration of the background of this type of parabolic material in the ancient world in general, and in the New Testament in particular.

The **literary setting** of the Parable of the Tares has several levels. In the public ministry of Jesus, this parable comes in the Matthean narrative structure in the second major period of ministry in Galilee; see my [Survey of Jesus’ Parables](#) at Cranfordville.com for details. Of the 85 identified parables of Jesus, the Parable of the Tares stands as number 33. The first period of Galilean ministry saw the use of parables 1-26, while this second period contains parables 27-38, and the final period of Galilean ministry has parables 39-43. Hidden in these details is the reality that during the year of popularity (first Galilean period) Jesus made extensive use of parables in his teaching ministry, but as opposition to him arose and more time

was spent with just the Twelve, less parables were used. Then, as he moved toward Jerusalem and crucifixion the use of parables increased with parables 44-85 coming during these concluding months of his earthly life.

The next level of literary setting has to do with the Matthean structure for chapter thirteen. This chapter becomes [the third of five discourses](#) in Matthew's gospel, as the outline below illustrates:

- The Prologue Matt. 1-2
- Book One: The Son begins to proclaim the Kingdom Matt. 3:1-7:29
 - Narrative: Beginnings of the ministry Matt. 3:1-4:25
 - Discourse: The Sermon on the Mount Matt. 5:1-7:29
- Book Two: The mission of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee Matt. 8:1-11:1
 - Narrative: The cycle of nine miracle stories Matt. 8:1-9:38
 - Discourse: The mission, past and future Matt. 10:1-11:1
- Book Three: Jesus meets opposition from Israel Matt. 11:2-13:53
 - Narrative: Jesus disputes with Israel and condemns it Matt. 11:2-12:50
 - Discourse: Jesus withdraws from Israel into parabolic speech Matt. 13:1-53*
- Book Four: The Messiah forms his church and prophesies his passion Matt. 13:54-18:35
 - Narrative: The itinerant Jesus prepares for the church by his deeds Matt. 13:54-17:27
 - Discourse: Church life and order Matt. 18:1-35
- Book Five: The Messiah and his church on the way to the passion Matt. 19:1-25:46
 - Narrative: Jesus leads his disciples to the cross as he confounds his enemies. Matt. 19:1-23:29
 - Discourse: The Last Judgment Matt. 24-25
- The Climax: Death-Resurrection Matt. 26-28

As such this chapter becomes a pivotal turning point in Matthew's story of Jesus. The focus from this point on will be on preparing his disciples for what lay ahead in Jerusalem at Passover. This is probably behind the strong contrast between the public uttering of the parable to the crowds and then the private explanation of the parable's meaning to just the disciples.

Additionally, one needs to explore the [distinctive aspects](#) of Matthew's collection of Jesus' parables since he drew from a similar collection in Mark, as did also Luke. See [the listing](#) on page 3. Matthew used all of Mark's parables except for one (Mark #24). But more importantly, Matthew added several parables to the Markan list, none of which are in the Lukan list: 83, 85, 87-91. Our parable, 83 and 87, is a part of that material. These additional Matthean parables stress the value and surprised discovery of the Kingdom by select individuals.

II. Message

The passage breaks down naturally into two segments: a) the parable, vv. 24-30, and its explanation, vv. 36-43.

One of the interpretative questions raised by modern scholars is whether the original meaning of the parable (vv. 24-30) is the same as the interpretation given it later in the chapter (vv. 36-43). That is, has Matthew rendered a new interpretation of the parable in the explanation of its meaning? Opinions are divided here among contemporary New Testament scholars. I tend to see Matthew's subsequent explanation as being a part of the original setting (Sitz im Leben Jesu), rather than as a later creation (Sitz im Leben Kirche, or Sitz im Leben Verfassers).

In light of this, we will study the parable with its explanation together, developing the scenes of the story as the organizing frames of reference. Three scenes naturally surface in the story line: a) planting, b) growing, c) harvesting.

a. Planting, vv. 24-25, 36-39a

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p><13:24> ἄλλην παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων, Ὁμοιωθὴ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν</p>	<p>24 Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be com-</p>	<p>24 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to</p>	<p>24 Here is another story Jesus told: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted</p>

άνθρωπῳ σπείραντι καλὸν σπέρμα ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ. <13:25> ἐν δὲ τῷ καθεύδειν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ὁ ἐχθρὸς καὶ ἐπέσπειρεν ζιζάνια ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ σίτου καὶ ἀπῆλθεν.

<13:36> Τότε ἀφείξ τοὺς ὄχλους ἦλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν. καὶ προσῆλθον αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ λέγοντες, Διασάφησον ἡμῖν τὴν παραβολὴν τῶν ζιζανίων τοῦ ἀγροῦ. <13:37> ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Ὁ σπείρων τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, <13:38> ὁ δὲ ἀγρὸς ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος, τὸ δὲ καλὸν σπέρμα οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας· τὰ δὲ ζιζάνια εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ, <13:39α> ὁ δὲ ἐχθρὸς ὁ σπείρας αὐτὰ ἐστὶν ὁ διάβολος,

Notes:

Important to our understanding is to keep the two settings clearly in mind. The parable is given to the crowds by the seashore in Galilee, but the explanation is given only to the disciples privately later in a house in Capernaum. The crowds heard the story, drawn from the agricultural world around them. The “planting” scene seems strange to modern ears, especially the “second” planting of the weeds. In northern Palestine, particularly in the southern region of the province of Galilee the planting of grains, mostly wheat and barley, was common place. The fields there were abundantly fertile and a farmer could raise a family and make a decent living on two to five acres of land. The mentioning of slaves suggests this was a rather large estate of a wealthy landowner, rather than the more common peasant farmer of the region. The planting of the “good seed” in the fall of the year was very typical and normal. In fact, this aspect ties the parable to the Parable of the Sower earlier in Matthew thirteen.

What seems strange is the planting of the weeds by an enemy. Most commentators struggle over this, assuming that since it sounds implausible in our world it must have also been implausible in the world of Jesus. A German scholar over a century ago did his homework well and reminds us that “since a similar occurrence is reported from modern Palestine, the parable of the Tares among the Wheat may spring from an actual event” (Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev ed, Eng. transl., p. 224). The word translated as “weeds” by modern English translators, and as “tares” by pre-twentieth century English translations, is ζιζάνιον (zidsanion) and has been identified as *lolium temulentum*, a poisonous darnel that looked like wheat in the early stages of its growth. Such plants would most always have popped up in wheat fields in ancient Palestine, but the voluminous amounts described here suggest something else. The enemy’s intention was evidently to ruin his neighbor’s harvest causing at least financial harm, if not physical harm.

pared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 "But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away.

36 Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." 37 And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, 38 and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil,

someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil;

good seed in his field. 25 But that night as everyone slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat.

36 Then, leaving the crowds outside, Jesus went into the house. His disciples said, "Please explain the story of the weeds in the field." 37 "All right," he said. "I, the Son of Man, am the farmer who plants the good seed. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. The weeds are the people who belong to the evil one. 39 The enemy who planted the weeds among the wheat is the Devil.

How Jesus interpreted this part of the story (vv. 36-39a) is the intriguing aspect. In a straightforward “this equals that” pattern, the interpretation given to the disciples in the house is as follows:

The sower is the **Son of Man** (Ὁ σπείρων τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου)

The field is the world (ὁ δὲ ἀγρός ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος,)

The good seed are the **sons of the Kingdom** (τὰ δὲ καλὸν σπέρμα οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας,)

The weeds are the **sons of the Evil One** (τὰ δὲ ζιζάνια εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ,)

The enemy is the **Devil** (ὁ δὲ ἐχθρὸς ὁ σπείρας αὐτὰ ἐστὶν ὁ διάβολος,)

Thus in Jesus’ own interpretation of the parable, he saw himself as the one planting children of God in this world, while the Devil is planting his children in this world at the same time and in the same place. To be a part of God’s rule legitimately is to be connected to Jesus as **the Son of Man**, a **title used numerous times** in reference to Jesus in the gospels. As such it had messianic tones and identified Jesus as the promised Messiah, as J. Julius Scott, Jr. calls attention to [in his article](#) on the Son of Man:

Son of Man. The term “Son of Man” occurs sixty-nine times in the Synoptic Gospels, thirteen times in John, and once in Acts. All but three occurrences come from the lips of Jesus. In John 12:34, the crowd, equating the Son of Man with eternal Messiah, was puzzled at Jesus’ prediction that he would be “lifted up” and inquired about the identity of the Son of Man. The dying martyr Stephen said he saw “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). Jesus frequently refers to the Son of Man in the third person, causing some to assume he was not speaking of himself. Nevertheless the term seems to be not only a self-designation, but Jesus’ favorite one.

In the Synoptics references to the Son of Man may be loosely grouped into three categories: those which speak of him as: (1) present with authority and power (Mark 2:10,27); (2) suffering rejection and death by crucifixion at the hands of humans as a ransom for many (Mark 8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:45; 14:41); and (3) returning at some future time in glory to judge, and bring the consummation of all things (Mark 8:38; 13:26; 14:62). Son of Man references in John fall roughly into the same categories but with some special emphases. John 3:13 and 6:27, 62 allude to the eternal existence of the Son of Man; 1:51 and 8:28 imply an invisible continuing relation with God not found in the Synoptics; 12:23 and 13:31 speak of his glorification during his earthly life; and 3:13-16 and 6:53 make plain that the Son of Man’s work brings eternal life.

Thus Jesus’ own word was a powerful declaration of his divine authority to bring people into the Kingdom of God through his preaching and teaching ministry. The recognition of this by his followers is crucial. In his own day, such a claim did seem preposterous to many Jewish people, especially the religious leaders. To the early 70s Matthean community of Jewish believers, the reinforcement of this claim in the face of pressure to abandon Jesus as a false teacher in favor of the religious traditions of the Jewish people was very important to Matthew. The true people of God are found in the community of faith, not in a synagogue.

This is the enduring message of this passage. In a day of growing religious pluralism, we who are believers must reaffirm this central message in our world, however unpopular that may be. The fourth gospel asserted the same principle with different words: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me’” (Jhn 14:6, NRSV). Without becoming obnoxious or elitist, Christians need to stake their claim to this ancient teaching of Jesus.

At the same time, this part of the parable reminds us, especially with the explanation, that the Devil is at work in our world as well producing his own children. Evil is real, and people can be evil to the core. Implied in this part of the parable also is the truth that sometimes we can’t clearly distinguish between who is a child of God and who is a child of Satan. Eventually that difference will become clear, but not necessarily at the beginning.

b. Growing, vv. 26-29

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<13:26> ὅτε δὲ ἐβλάστησεν ὁ χόρτος καὶ καρπὸν ἐποίησεν, τότε ἐφάνη καὶ τὰ ζιζάνια. <13:27> προσελθόντες δὲ οἱ δοῦλοι τοῦ	26 "But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. 27 "The slaves of the landowner	26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the house-	26 When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. 27 The farmer's servants came and told him, 'Sir, the field where

οικοδεσπότην εἶπον αὐτῷ
, Κύριε, οὐχὶ καλὸν
σπέρμα ἔσπειρας ἐν τῷ
σῶ ἀγρῷ; πόθεν οὖν ἔχει
ζιζάνια; <13:28> ὁ δὲ ἔφη
αὐτοῖς, Ἐχθρὸς ἄνθρωπος
τοῦτο ἐποίησεν. οἱ δὲ
δοῦλοι λέγουσιν αὐτῷ,
Θέλεις οὖν ἀπελθόντες
συλλέξωμεν αὐτά;
<13:29> ὁ δὲ φησιν, Οὐ,
μήποτε συλλέγοντες τὰ
ζιζάνια ἐκριζώσητε ἅμα
αὐτοῖς τὸν σῖτον.

‘Sir, did you not sow
good seed in your field?
How then does it have
tares?’ 28 "And he said
to them, ‘An enemy has
done this!’ The slaves
said to him, ‘Do you
want us, then, to go and
gather them up?’ 29 "But
he said, ‘No; for while you
are gathering up the
tares, you may uproot the
wheat with them.

him, "Master, did you not
sow good seed in your
field? Where, then, did
these weeds come
from?’ 28 He answered,
"An enemy has done this.'
The slaves said to him,
"Then do you want us to
go and gather them?’ 29
But he replied, "No; for in
gathering the weeds you
would uproot the wheat
along with them.

you planted that good
seed is full of weeds!’ 28
"An enemy has done it!
the farmer ex-
claimed." "Shall we pull
out the weeds?’ they
asked. 29 "He replied,
"No, you'll hurt the wheat
if you do.

Notes:

This part of the parable story receives no explanation in the subsequent segment. It also could have been included with the first segment in a twofold division of the parable. But I have intentionally segmented it out for a specific purpose.

In the history of interpreting this parable, this segment especially has been seen as the basis for understanding the parable as a reference to the church. The field is the church, not the world as Jesus defined it in v. 38. Beginning with some of the Church Fathers, Augustine in particular, these aspects of the parable story were allegorized in ways foreign to the parable itself, and certainly to the explanation of the parable in vv. 36-43. Thus the slaves in the story who ask whether they should do the normal thing in that day by weeding the wheat field are seen as symbols of Christian leaders wanting to purge out perceived “tares” in the membership of the church. Any of you ever hoe cotton? If so, you understand well what is going on here in the parable. The response by the landowner is no, they should leave the field alone since pulling out the voluminous number of weeds would potentially damage the wheat. Thus this interpretative tradition denies the validity of church discipline and would open the doors of the church to everyone whether there is evidence of sincere commitment to Christ or not.

In the allegorizing approach to this parable over the years, this part has often been interpreted as saying that church discipline is wrong and that the church should be inclusive of everyone, regardless of whether they are genuinely committed Christians or not. Richard B. Gardner (“Matthew,” *Believers Church Bible Commentary*, iPreach) summarizes the situation well from the time of Calvin in the 1500s among Protestants:

Of the parables found in Matthew 13, one in particular calls for comment here, because of the way it has fueled the long-standing debate about the nature of the church. This is the parable of the weeds of the field (13:24-30, 36-43). As understood by proponents of a territorial church, the parable portrays the church as a mixed community, where true believers and others are found together like wheat and tares. Calvin writes, for example: “So long as the church is in pilgrimage in this world, the good and sincere will be mixed in it with the bad and the hypocrites” (1972, 2:74-75).

The Anabaptists, however, disputed this interpretation. Calling attention to the way the text itself defines the field of action (cf. v. 38), Menno Simons and others insisted that the mingling of wheat and weeds describes the world, not the church (cf. Menno Simons: 750; Augsburg: 176-177). Jesus’ will for the church, they argued, is defined in Matthew 18, which clearly envisions a disciplined community of the faithful. As a review of commentaries on the text reveals, the debate described above is still going on.

A survey of many recent commentaries by reputable scholars will reveal a tendency toward this same misinterpretation of the parable today. Here the disposition toward inclusiveness, often at any cost, leads many interpreters down a blind path and into false conclusions about this parable.

For those of us in a believers church tradition this seems strange. But I came to understand this thinking through encountering the state church tradition in Europe during the time I spent living there. Where membership is based upon infant baptism and often a rather superficial process of confirmation as an older child, one can easily understand why such a view of this passage developed. But to ground such

a view on this passage of scripture is blatantly false and misleading.

The community of faith does rub shoulders with the children of the Devil in the everyday world. This is clear from our experience and is the assumption of this passage. Who each person is spiritually may not always be as clear as it could be. But one point made emphatically in this parable is that this distinction will eventually become clear. The day of harvest will make that distinction abundantly clear.

c. Harvesting, vv. 30, 39b-42

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p><13:30> ἄφετε συναυξάνεσθαι ἀμφοτέρα ἕως τοῦ θερισμοῦ, καὶ ἐν καιρῷ τοῦ θερισμοῦ ἐρῶ τοῖς θερισταῖς, Συλλέξατε πρῶτον τὰ ζιζάνια καὶ δήσατε αὐτὰ εἰς δέσμας πρὸς τὸ κατακαῦσαι αὐτά, τὸν δὲ σῖτον συναγάγετε εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην μου.</p> <p>-----</p> <p>39b ὁ δὲ θερισμὸς συντέλεια αἰῶνός ἐστιν, οἱ δὲ θερισταὶ ἄγγελοί εἰσιν. <13:40> ὡςπερ οὖν συλλέγεται τὰ ζιζάνια καὶ πυρὶ [κατα]καίεται, οὕτως ἔσται ἐν τῇ συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος· <13:41> ἀποστελεῖ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ, καὶ συλλέξουσιν ἐκ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ πάντα τὰ σκάνδαλα καὶ τοὺς ποιοῦντας τὴν ἀνομίαν <13:42> καὶ βαλοῦσιν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν κάμινον τοῦ πυρός· ἐκεῖ ἔσται ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων. <13:43> Τότε οἱ δίκαιοι ἐκλάμπουσιν ὡς ὁ ἥλιος ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν. ὁ ἔχων ὄτα ἀκουέτω.</p>	<p>30 `Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn." "</p> <p>-----</p> <p>39b and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. 40 "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. 41 "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, 42 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 "Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.</p>	<p>30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "</p> <p>-----</p> <p>39b the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!</p>	<p>30 Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds and burn them and to put the wheat in the barn.' "</p> <p>-----</p> <p>39b The harvest is the end of the world, and the harvesters are the angels. 40 "Just as the weeds are separated out and burned, so it will be at the end of the world. 41 I, the Son of Man, will send my angels, and they will remove from my Kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace and burn them. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the godly will shine like the sun in their Father's Kingdom. Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand!</p>

Notes:

The climatic part of the parable story is harvest day (v. 30), which is interpreted eschatologically (vv. 39b-43) as the final judgment at the end of the age.

Very typically the landowner's instructions to the slaves was to let the tares alone and on harvest day the reapers would gather out the weeds from the wheat so that they could be burned for fuel. With wood being scarce in that part of the world, these dead weeds could find some usefulness as fuel.

In the interpretation given in verses 39b-43, the harvest day becomes the day of final judgment, as is made clear by the identification of several elements of harvest day:

The harvest is the end of the age, (ὁ δὲ θερισμὸς συντέλεια αἰῶνός ἐστιν.)

The reapers are angels. (οἱ δὲ θερισταὶ ἄγγελοι εἰσιν.)

40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Here the weeds, earlier identified as sons of the Devil, are labeled “all evildoers.” The play on the Greek word, τοῦ πονηροῦ (of the Evil One, v. 38b) with τοὺς ποιοῦντας τὴν ἀνομίαν (those doing lawlessness, v. 41) is not as clear in the English as in the original Greek. “Like father, like son” is the assumption. Actions will eventually betray the true character of the person. These are the same people who do not belong to God, but to the Devil. As such they will suffer his fate in judgment.

The collecting out of His kingdom (v. 41) doesn’t imply the church. Instead, the angels will collect out of the domain where Jesus rules, in this case, the world, so that what is left will be purged of evil and stand as a testimony to the glory of the Lord. The kingdom of the Son of Man is the same kingdom as that of the Father in these verses; no distinction should be made between the two. The first is continued into the second.

Eschatologically, Matthew asserts here the frightful reality of eternal damnation for all those not genuine sons of God. “Burned with fire” show up [elsewhere](#) in this context. The “furnace of fire” is a [Matthean phrase](#) depicting eschatological judgment. “Weeping and gnashing of teeth” is also a [strongly Matthean phrase](#) for the torments of [Hell](#). Timothy Phillips has a [helpful summary](#) of the teachings of Jesus on this subject in the gospels:

Jesus says more about hell than any other biblical figure. His warnings of the eschatological judgment are liberally colored with the imagery of hell (Matt 5:22; 7:19; 8:12; par. Luke 13:28-30; Matt 10:15, 28; 11:22, 24; 18:8-9; par. Mark 9:43-49; Luke 17:26-29; John 15:6). He portrays this future judgment through pictures of Sodom's destruction (Luke 17:29-30): fire, burning sulfur, and a fiery furnace (Gen 19:24-25). These images of God's judgment were well established in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature. Important portrayals of hell are also present in Jesus' parables, including the tares (Matt 13:40-42), the net (Matt 13:50); the great supper (Matt 22:13), the good servant and the wicked servant (Matt 24:51; par. Luke 12:46-47), the talents (Matt 25:30), and the last judgment (Matt 25:46). Here "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 13:50; 24:51; 25:30) and "darkness" (Matt 22:13; 25:30) are key descriptive phrases.

The point made by Jesus to his disciples in the explanation segment is to reinforce to them the reality that a day of judgment and separation of evil from good is going to take place. One of the implications of this parable is that just as Jesus in his ministry was planting good seeds who would become productive members of God’s kingdom, those seeds should likewise turn into planters sowing good seeds through leading individuals to become a part of God’s kingdom. The historical framework of this collection of parables in chapter thirteen reminds us that such sowing may have to be done in growing opposition. Jesus’ public ministry was turning a corner by this point in the Matthean narrative, and this section is cast in a larger section depicting growing conflict with the religious authorities by Jesus. The Parable of the Sower before this one also reminds us that we have maybe a one in four shot at sowing productive seeds. The Parable of the Tares along with that of the Net and others vividly remind us of the coming day of judgment that will separate out the children of God from the children of the devil. The fate of God’s children is to bask in the glory of the Heavenly Father for all eternity. The fate of the devil’s children is to suffer unbelievable torments inflicted upon him and his children for all eternity. Thus, Jesus’ earlier call to these disciples to become “fishers of men” takes on deeper and more urgent meaning. Matthew will close his gospel account with this same Jesus commissioning his followers to disciple all nations so that they might come under His rule and reign, and thus be the sons of God for eternity.

Thus the final admonition of verse 43, “The one having ears, let him listen,” becomes that call to pay close attention to these important words of our Lord. We would do well to pay close attention.

Diagram

1 24

Ἄλλην παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς

λέγων,

/-----|

α

Ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ

σπείραντι καλὸν σπέρμα
ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ.

25

δὲ

ἐν τῷ καθεύδειν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους

β

ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ὁ ἐχθρὸς

καὶ

γ

ἐπέσπειρεν ζιζάνια

ἀνά μέσον τοῦ σίτου

καὶ

δ

ἀπῆλθεν.

26

δὲ

ὅτε ἐβλάστησεν ὁ χόρτος

καὶ

καρπὸν ἐποίησεν,

τότε

ε

ἐφάνη καὶ τὰ ζιζάνια.

27

δὲ

προσελθόντες

ζ

οἱ δούλοι τοῦ οἰκοδεσπότη εἶπον αὐτῷ,

/-----|

Κύριε,

οὐκὶ καλὸν σπέρμα ἔσπειρας

ἐν τῷ σῷ ἀγρῷ;

οὖν

πόθεν ἔχει ζιζάνια;

28

δὲ

ι

ὁ ἔφη αὐτοῖς,

Ἐχθρὸς ἄνθρωπος τοῦτο ἐποίησεν.

δὲ

θ

οἱ δούλοι λέγουσιν αὐτῷ,

οὖν

θέλεις ἀπελθόντες συλλέξωμεν αὐτά;

29

δὲ

η

ὁ φησιν,

Οὐ,

μήποτε συλλέγοντες τὰ ζιζάνια ἐκριζώσητε

ἅμα αὐτοῖς τὸν σῖτον.

30

ἄφετε συναυξάνεσθαι ἀμφοτέρα

ἕως τοῦ θερισμοῦ,

καὶ

ἐν καιρῷ τοῦ θερισμοῦ

ἔρῳ τοῖς θερισταῖς,

Συλλέξατε πρῶτον τὰ ζιζάνια

καὶ
δήσατε αὐτὰ
εἰς δέσμας
πρὸς τὸ κατακαῦσαι αὐτά,
δὲ
τὸν σῖτον συναγάγετε
εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην μου.

36 Τότε
ἀφείδους τοὺς ὄχλους
2 ἦλθεν
εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν.

καὶ
3 προσῆλθον αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ
λέγοντες,

κ *Διασάφισον ἡμῖν τὴν παραβολὴν τῶν ζιζανίων τοῦ ἀγροῦ.*

37 δὲ
ἀποκριθεὶς
4 ὁ...εἶπεν,

λ *Ὁ σπείρων τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου,*

μ *δὲ
ὁ ἀγρὸς ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος,*

ν *δὲ
τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας·*

ξ *δὲ
τὰ ζιζάνιά εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ,*

39 *δὲ
ὁ ἐχθρὸς...ἐστὶν ὁ διάβολος,
ὁ σπείρας αὐτὰ*

π *δὲ
ὁ θερισμὸς συντέλεια αἰῶνος ἐστίν,*

ρ *δὲ
οἱ θερισταὶ ἄγγελοί εἰσιν.*

40 οὖν
ὡσπερ συλλέγεται τὰ ζιζάνια
καὶ
πυρὶ [κατα]καίεται,

σ οὕτως
ἔσται
ἐν τῇ συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος·

τ 41 *ἀποστελεῖ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ,*

υ *καὶ
συλλέξουσιν...πάντα τὰ σκάνδαλα*

*ἐκ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ
καὶ*

τοὺς ποιοῦντας τὴν ἀνομίαν