

“Eschatological Ethics”
Matthew 13:24-43
April 22, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

I realize that the title of this sermon will probably need some explanation for most of you. The second word is a familiar one. Ethics describes how we ought to live, answering the question of what constitutes good behavior. But what about that first word? It comes from two Greek words that mean the study of last things. So eschatology deals with what the Bible says about that time when Jesus will fully establish his kingdom. Eschatological ethics, then, talks about how we should live in light of the age that is to come. The six remaining parables of Matthew 13 are all about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is telling us what that kingdom is like, and when we accept the nature of this kingdom, it will change the way we live today.

Let me say this differently. In his book, *The Safest Place on Earth*, Larry Crab said that we must “ask what questions God has bothered to answer in the Word. Only He is wise enough to know which questions need answers. Then study His answers for the rest of your life.” What we tend to do instead is to bring questions to God that he has not chosen to answer, sometimes even twisting the Bible to get some answers to those questions. We want to know things like when the world will end, will dogs be in heaven, or how God can be sovereign and man still have a will. God has not chosen to answer any of those questions. But here’s a question God has decided to answer. What is heaven like? The three parables of today’s passage teach us two things about how we live today in light of the coming kingdom of heaven.

I. Patience with Evil

The parable of the weeds teaches us something Jesus thinks we need to know both about the coming kingdom and how we are to live today. The parable is about a wealthy and powerful landowner who had an enemy determined to harm the landowner. He devised a plot that reminds me of some modern day industrial sabotage, not unlike an author of a computer virus who tries to bring harm to Microsoft. The enemy in the parable does his damage through sowing weeds in the fields where the other man had planted good seed. The “weed” spoken of in this text is commonly thought to be a specific weed called “darnel.” This weed is a member of the grass family and very much resembles wheat. It is almost impossible to tell the difference until the wheat matures, at which time the grain allows for the easy distinguishing between the two. So this enemy came by night to sow this weed, because he lacked the power to come against his enemy in a more open way. He came and went

undetected until the seeds germinated and then grew enough to distinguish the good seed from the bad. The servants of the landowner wanted to go and rip out the weeds, but the landowner wouldn't allow it. He reasoned that such an action would inevitably bring harm to the good wheat. It would be better, he said, to let both grow to maturity. It would then be an easy thing to tell the difference, and the wheat could be separated from the tares and each dealt with appropriately, storing the wheat in the barn and burning the tares.

It is not a difficult thing to interpret this parable, because Jesus gives us the interpretation. The landowner who sows the good seed is Jesus. The enemy who devises a scheme to bring harm is the devil. The good seed are the sons of God, while the bad seed are the children of the devil. The field is the world itself, the harvest is the final judgment and the reapers are angels. The primary point, then, is that evil is given a temporary reprieve in the current era. It is allowed to continue without divine intervention in the form of judgment. But judgment delayed is very different from judgment cancelled. At the end of the age, there will be a great separation of the wheat from the weeds, directed by Jesus himself. With every one of us, he will direct you to go either to the side with the wheat or the side with the weeds. The wheat are those who have borne fruit as a result of faith in Jesus. The weeds are all evildoers who will be judged, being consigned to a "fiery furnace" where **"there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (13:42).

There is a clear ethical implication of this end-time judgment. The followers of Jesus are to renounce all violent and coercive strategies for dealing with evil. The State is not under this same restriction, since God has given to civil government both the power and the duty to punish evil. That is not the case with the Church. I can identify with the servants in the parable who want to go and uproot the weeds immediately. There is something inside of us that wants evil punished. Do you remember that occasion when Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, and one village there refused to receive them? James and John expressed what many of us want to see when they asked Jesus, **"Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"** (Luke 9:54). I think there have times when most of us could identify with that longing for vengeance. When I see evil men abuse women and children, something deep inside of me wants them to be punished. Jesus says that any punishing that is done to them is not to be done by me or by any of his followers in this era. A great resource given to us to help us not take vengeance is the assurance given right here in this passage. There will be a day of reckoning, accomplished by Jesus at the end time. I don't have to bring retribution upon evildoers because Jesus has promised that he will do so. And he knows how to do so much better than I. His judgment is completely righteous because he is God and nothing is hidden from his sight. Knowing that Jesus will take care of this allows us to leave it alone.

I think there is a second ethical implication of this. Not only are we to renounce all violence and vengeance, but also all coercive efforts when dealing with the enemies of the Church. The Church has received quite a black eye when it has not followed this peaceful behavior. The Crusades were an attempt to take Jerusalem back from the Muslims by force. Several centuries before the Crusades, Charlemagne was the Holy Roman Emperor beginning in the year 800 A.D. After conquering some tribe or nation, he would usually attempt to force their conversion to Christianity. He would sometimes have vanquished armies stand before him by a river. He then offered them a choice. Would they like to receive the water of baptism or the waters of drowning? Such a misuse of power brings great harm to the Church. Physical violence is not the only way we can become coercive. We can also do so verbally, attempting to control others to do what we think they should do.

Jesus' reason for this non-violent, non-coercive response to evil is surprising. His stated reason for this is not the protection of the weeds, but the protection of the wheat. It is for our sakes that Jesus forbids us a power-response to evil. It is so that the wheat doesn't get uprooted along with the weeds. There are two ways our use of power brings harm to us. First, it could bring harm to potential converts to Christ who are now enemies. How many Christians started as former enemies of Christ? The apostle Paul comes to mind as notable in that group. How do we know what God might want to do with even the most vicious enemy of the Church?

A second way our use of power can hurt us is simply by harming our ability to trust God. The exercise of power encourages self-trust, while weakness encourages trust in God. That brings us to our next two parables. But before considering those, let's apply this one. In what situation are you living in the midst of evil? Perhaps it's a situation at work or in your extended family. Or it may even be in your immediate family. While there is nothing wrong with protecting yourself in that evil situation, you are not to resolve the evil on your own. That is God's job, to be done in God's time. So give up control of that and be patient.

II. Acceptance of Weakness

Two parables come next that teach us that God uses the little and the small to accomplish big things. The first of these two parables is the mustard seed parable. Jesus points out how small the seed is. A mustard seed is about 1/32 of an inch in diameter. Take a sesame seed and cut it in half, and that's about the size of the mustard seed. But when it grows, it produces quite a large plant, commonly growing to a height of six to eight feet and in some cases to as high as 12 feet. It would branch out in a manner similar to a tree, so that it became tree-like. And since it's an annual plant, all this growth would take place in

only one growing season. The point is the great size and seemingly miraculous growth of the kingdom from a very small beginning.

The parable of the leaven teaches the same. Perhaps Jesus had watched his mother baking bread. He had seen her mix the water, flour and salt and then add just a small amount of yeast. Then as time passed, the lump of dough grew in what seemed a miraculous process as the yeast quietly spread through the entire lump. Jesus makes his point by using quite a large amount of dough in his illustration. Three measures would be about fifty pounds of dough. Yet the yeast will spread even through such a large amount as that, though the yeast started as such a small amount.

Several lessons are taught here. One is that the church will indeed grow, in spite of all the troubles (some even self-inflicted) encountered through its history. The church started small, with only 120 disciples right after the ascension of Christ. But listen to these statistics about the growth of the church since then. By the turn of the first century, in A.D. 100, it is estimated that there was one Christian for every 360 people in the world. By the turn of the millennium in 1000 A.D., the church had grown to a ratio of one Christian for every 270 people in the world. By the dawn of the Protestant Reformation in 1500, the ratio was 85-1, and by 1900 21-1. In the year 2000, with a world population of 6.1 billion, it is estimated that there is one Christian for every 9.3 people in the world. While the Church in Europe and America may be shrinking, it is growing rapidly in the southern hemisphere.

Another lesson we can learn from these parables is the positive benefit the church is to have on our world. We read of the mustard seed that it grows to the point that **“the birds of the air come and make nest in its branches”** (13:32). And bread is the basic food of many diets around the world. The Church is to bring life to the world.

One caution is in order here. Some have taken from these parables a theological view known as postmillennialism. That is a view that believes the world is going to continue to get better as the church grows and exerts its positive influence on the world. The great American theologian Jonathan Edwards was a proponent of such a view, but I think this is one area where he erred. We must remember the parable of the weeds, that the evil ones will be with us until the final harvesting and judgment. It seems to me that a more accurate perspective on what the Bible says we can expect to happen as we get nearer the return of Jesus is that both the kingdom of darkness and the Church will grow.

A third lesson to be learned from these two small to big parables is to have confidence in the “small” gospel. What is our main weapon for this astoundingly large result? It is just a word of good news, just a tiny seed. It is a humble story of a baby born to poor parents. But that baby was the Son of

God. He grew up, died unjustly but was raised again by God. In doing so, he has conquered evil and provides a home for any who will come to him. I love the image in the parable of the mustard seed of the birds finding a home here. Have you found a home in Jesus and his Church? What is home? Among other things, it's the place where you can rest. Have you learned to rest in the home God has provided for you in Jesus, or is there a restlessness in your heart? The simple gospel comes to us with a message different from any other. All other religions tell us to strive first in order to gain some place of rest. The gospel says, "Rest first by trusting in Jesus." As we do that, we find our home.

Do you have confidence in this little word to have world-changing results? I think one of the applications of this is in the area of teaching our children. Children often appear to have more interest in refreshments or in the art project of Sunday School than in the Bible lesson of the day. It can seem so inadequate, and we might wonder if anything is getting through. Jesus says that this is normal. We are sowing a little seed of God's word, and big things come from little beginnings.

Preaching a sermon is another example of this. A sermon is a small, humble thing. Far better speeches can be found in a number of places. In our day of shrinking attention spans, we are told that images are far more effective than mere words. I think that's probably true. But we dare not look down on the humble sermon, for the simple reason that it is the mustard seed that grows by God's grace. It is the means God has decided to use, weak though it may be.

Missionaries fit in this same category, as they often go to a culture not their own to tell others of Jesus. It is an exercise in weakness, but one in which God acts and brings about his good results. That is the way of the kingdom.

CONCLUSION:

I read this week about a group of POWs in World War II who managed to construct a radio from bits and scraps and hide it in their bunk. It was on that crude radio that they first heard of the Allied victory. But it was not until four days later that the liberators reached their prison camp. For four days they knew that the victory was theirs, though they were not yet experiencing it. But can't you imagine the joy of their hearts, even as they waited through four more days of misery. Our view of the future really does change our current behaviors and attitudes. Let us live now in light of that complete victory Jesus has promised, even if the works of evil linger.