

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

HARVESTING THE DEAD

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Mt 13:24 Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25but while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" 28He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" . . . 36Then Jesus 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." 37He 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; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. 40Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42and they will throw them into the

furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

[Note: Exegetes as diverse as Dan Otto Via, Joachim Jeremias, and Amos N. Wilder generally agree that Jesus’ parables were more like metaphors than allegories, allegorical tendencies being later interpretations of the original parable or riddle. One-to-one correspondences in allegories tend to straightjacket an otherwise surprising and always current gospel. In the following interpretation, the chief aim is to let the gospel be heard above the screaming allegory.]

DIAGNOSIS: Dying in the Field of the Lord

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Am I Wheat or Weed?*

Everyone, without exception, is dying to know the answer to this ultimate question; that’s how it is for those who live under the law. Such inquirers (ourselves included) not only judge by appearances, but live wholly unto themselves. They have no need for “ears” (v. 43) because they have all the answers they will ever want, as if they or other like-minded inquirers alone had raised questions about their lives.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Who’s Asking?*

What we cannot bear to realize, and hence seek to avoid, is that the question behind every other question is not ours to ask; for we ourselves are on trial. The Questioner we seek to avoid, yet before whom we stand, always and everywhere, is God (Jesus, v. 24), in whose field we live (v. 38) and whose opinion of us is final. We can face ourselves and our own questioning with comparative ease because we do not judge ourselves in a final sense. But there is one Questioner we do not want to face. So

long as we live under the law, being judged by God rather than merely ourselves, we simply cannot risk asking the Questioner anything. We would not like the answer, nor the Answerer.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Weeping, Weeping*

Therefore the final question, where God is both Questioner and Answerer, is “put before them” (v. 24) in the form of a paradox. The parable acknowledges that we are forced by the law to live under the righteous judgment of God. But by demanding God’s judgments ahead of time (before the harvest, v. 28), we shall find ourselves on the side of the weeds and an “enemy” (v. 39) of the gospel. How so? In questioning God’s judgment upon us, a questioning we cannot stop ourselves from doing, we display our dis-trust of the Owner of the field to keep his harvest promise (gospel). For us questioners, the harvest will rather be like a “furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 42).

PROGNOSIS: Living in the Field of the Lord

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Shining Like the Sun*

“Let anyone with ears listen” (v. 43) to what God is doing! God’s righteous judgment is being withheld! For the sake of “good seed” still being sown, the harvest is delayed. Until then, the field belongs to the Son of Man (v. 37). In the unfolding story of God’s questioning of us, Jesus’ crucifixion is a harvest of judgment in our stead. Because he took our place in the final judgment, we no longer need to ask the final questions we were once dying to ask. And because he himself has been harvested from the dead, we too shall be harvested. Now, we can bear to wait for our own harvesting into the “barn” (v. 35) when “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father” (v. 43). In view of the expected harvest, the field of the Lord is a mixture of what appears as wheat and

weeds. Any distinction to be made, finally, between the “children of the kingdom” and the “children of the evil one” (v. 38), is not ours to inquire about.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Who Says?*

Jesus the Christ, to whom the field belongs (indeed, “heaven and earth” 24:18), has promised us the kingdom. Therefore, we can trust him at harvest time! We may put our final questions aside and trust that he, our Sower-Savior, has our best interests at heart! We can trust him, despite our own continued questioning and failures! Despite contrary evidence that others, especially God, judge us as weeds to be burned! Most astonishing of all, we can live trusting in Christ, despite contrary evidence that God seems to have forsaken his own promises!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *On Not Inquiring*

It is not for us to inquire into the final judgments of God. Because we are free in Christ not to so inquire, we don’t. We do not keep score. We do not count up the numbers (any of them), or the dollars. The harvest is in the sure hands of the Harvester. For those who have died in Christ, it is easy not to inquire or to count. For only the dead are harvested. There is nothing left to do except to proclaim the good news and to love one another, without inquiring or counting. Even if we, in the meager judgment of others, fail or die, we live in the sure and certain hope of the harvest.