

St. Andrew's UMC
July 20th, 2008
Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43
"The Good Seed"

Sometimes, reading the Bible confuses us. One account might say one thing, but another might say the opposite. Since we do not like such conflicts in the Bible, we tend to find a way that would explain such a contradiction. Some choose to ignore such a contradiction between the different accounts, while others try to harmonize it. But these are not necessarily the correct way of interpreting the scriptures. The Bible is not like a dress that one can tailor it to one's taste and style. Rather, we are supposed to tailor our taste and lifestyle to the truth found in the Bible.

For example, in one instance, Jesus told his disciples "**all who take the sword will perish by the sword (Mt. 26:52).**" But in another instance, Jesus told his disciples: "**But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one (Lk. 22:36).**"

So, how can the teacher who warned his disciples against using the sword, insist them to go out and arm themselves with one? It is like having a person who advocates banning handguns tell his friends to go out and buy handguns. I am not sure if anyone could interpret these verses, and make Jesus appear to be *not* contradicting himself.

The problems with interpreting the Bible are not just limited to the seeming inconsistency of the individual, biblical accounts; the problems are also found in the interpreters and the readers themselves who bring their own assumptions and expectations to the task.

The readers of the Bible tend to superimpose their own historical context and political sensitivities into the biblical accounts whose circumstances would be vastly different from their own. For example, no one would mistake what Charlton Heston said at an NRA convention with what he said in the movie, *The Ten Commandments*. Unfortunately, when the two distinct accounts are written and bound together in one volume many years later, the pious readers might assume that the two accounts are intended for the same target audience and the shared purpose.

We know that no fool would confuse the two accounts in real life, but in reading of the Bible, it happens more than often. That is because the readers tend to look for coherence rather than contradiction in the Bible. The Bible is, however, a collection of the writings of many authors who never intended to establish the coherent contexts of each account for the convenience of the readers of the future.

The readers of the Bible must pay attention to the different context of each narrative. Once they realize it, they would understand that both Matthew and Luke perceived Jesus from distinct perspectives, and that distinction led to the opposing accounts in regards to the use of the sword. Depending on which side of the political issue one belongs, however, a reader would stick with the Matthean verse or the Lukan verse. The readers bring their own beliefs into interpreting the Bible, and give voice to the written words.

The different teachings found in the Bible require different interpretations. Last Sunday, we examined the Parable of the Sower who went out to sow the seeds. In that parable, the people who received the seed—the word of the kingdom—were compared to 4 different types of soils.

In the present parable we read this morning, people are compared to the wheat and the weeds. The good seeds are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one. By dividing the human race into two kinds, the idea was made clearer and simpler, but it raises even weightier, ethical questions.

In the parable of the wheat and the weeds there are only two types of human beings: the good and the evil. Such a dualistic view of the human nature assumes that human nature is either purely good, or purely evil. Is that what Jesus was trying to get across, that there are purely good people and purely evil people?

That dualistic distinction seems to render the answer to the age-old question of where evil originates from: the weeds were sown by the enemy, the devil. Since the devil has sown the evil ones, the interpreter might conclude that they must be purely, if not fundamentally, evil.

The parable also explains why God allows the evil in the world. Have you ever questioned why God would allow the evil people to continue their rampage, unpunished? The parable renders the interpretation that God

allows evil for the time being, in order to protect the good, until the harvest time.

One ethical question it raises is the issue of the religious cleansing attributed to Jesus: Jesus will send his angels who will collect all causes of sin and evildoers out of the world, and burn them in the furnace of fire.

The Christian view of the secular world is that it is finite, and its span of existence is scheduled to be consummated. The vision of the *consummation of the age*, or the end of the age, as Jesus called it, is the judgment day. And on that day, the radical event of final cleansing takes place. On that day, the evil ones would be thrown into the eternal fire, and the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

So, the interpreter goes: isn't it obvious that Jesus advocated a kind of mass cleansing, and that is the ultimate doctrine of the Christian faith, and therefore, we endorse the destruction of anyone who is deemed evil?

The problem with this sort of absolute division of the good from the evil is that it is impossible to do so in practical reality. But that did not deter Christians to interpret and apply the parable in practice, and persecute and condemn anyone who was deemed evil. The parable seems to give God's stamp of approval to eradicate whatever the enemy perceived by one side.

In the dualistic world view, the good and the evil are cast in the absolute mold, and if one side is not perceived as good, then it must be evil, vice versa. There is no grey area, there is no uncertainty, and there is no mistake in determining what is good and what is evil. It is God who is supposed to be doing this ultimate cleansing, but the faithful took it upon themselves to give God a break by offering to carry out the task by themselves throughout the history. We have seen it done by our own president when he declared certain countries as "Axis of Evil." They returned the favor by deeming America "the Great Satan."

Jesus spoke from a particular world view, when he told this parable. It was the world view that saw two opposing powers struggling against one another.

In itself, the parable is a coherent story, but once the interpreters tried to make sense of the parable, and apply it to the contemporary historical

context, problems arose: each side would believe that the other is on the devil's side.

In theory, the separation of the good from the evil is clear. Even the story of separating sheep from goats on the judgment day (Matthew 25) is quite clear. There is no mistaking a sheep as a goat.

In practice, however, it is not so easy. That is because, in reality, no one is *absolutely* good or perfect. That necessitates the assumption that no one is absolutely evil, either. Even those who are considered good make mistakes. Good people make bad decisions and unwise choices from time to time, and do and say hurtful things occasionally. And those who are considered evil can be compassionate, personable, humorous, charming, and they could accomplish commendable things.

How do we tell the good people from the evil ones? In the eyes of the Pharisees, the good people were the ones who observed the law to the letter. The evil ones are the ones who did not observe the law.

In the eyes of Jesus, however, the boundary of the good and the evil did not rest on observance of the law. Even Paul declared that all have sinned and fell short of glory of God (Rom. 3:23). No one is good, period. Since Jesus considered that only God in heaven is good (Mk. 10:18), the good and the evil had to be defined according to a different standard.

Jesus had a different take on who were the sinners, and on how God views those sinners, by saying that he came to call those sinners to repentance. Jesus also shed a light on the impartiality of God, or all-embracing compassion of God, by saying that God **“makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Mt. 5:45).”**

To the Pharisee's dismay, Jesus declared that it was those who bore the fruit of the kingdom that were good. Now, it was the children of the kingdom that were good. It was the sinners who repented that were good. Paul calls these sinners who repented the “justified” sinners—meaning, they are still sinners, but regarded as *righteous* in God's eyes.

The good people are not the perfect ones who never do wrong. The good people are considered good, because they realize and admit the mistakes

they made. The good are those who repent, who remember their past sinful history, and resolve not to repeat their sin. They still bear with the pain of remorse for what they have done.

The evil ones are not so. The evil ones are evil, because they insist that they are good. They are evil, because they do not suffer any pangs of conscience. They are evil, because they forget what they have done. They are evil, because they justify what they did. They are evil, because they believe that they did no evil. They are evil, because they claim that they have moved on from the past, but still practice the same action of the past. They are evil, because they refuse to account for their action. They are evil, because they never repent. They are evil in God's eyes, and they will never enter the kingdom of Heaven .

In God's eyes, both the good and the evil are imperfect. But there is this distinction: the good seeds are the sinners who repented. The good seeds did move on from the past, but they willingly suffer the consequences of their past action. Their hearts are broken, their spirits are wounded; but it is God who heals them and consoles them. God regards them as righteous in God's eyes. They are the good seeds that will shine like the sun in the kingdom of Heaven .

Jesus affirmed it when he said this:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners (Mk. 2:17).”