

Historic Commentary

(Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 13](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

Chromatius: The Lord clearly points out that he is the sower of good seeds. He does not cease to sow in this world as in a field. God's word is like good seed in the hearts of people, so that each of us according to the seeds sown in us by God may bear spiritual and heavenly fruit.

The Lord points out that our foe the devil sows the weeds of his wickedness and malice to choke the seed of God in us. Thus he says, "But while men were asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away." The Lord indicates that the devil sows weeds among sleeping people—that is, among those who through negligence are overcome by their infidelity as in a kind of lethargy and fall asleep amid the divine injunctions. The apostle says concerning them: "For they who sleep, sleep at night, and they who are drunk, are drunk at night. Therefore let us not sleep as do the rest, but let us be wakeful and sober."

Those foolish virgins about whom we read in the Gospel, weighed down by their lethargy and infidelity, not having taken oil for their vessels, were unable to go forth and meet the bridegroom. Hence it is always uppermost in the mind of this devil—the enemy of the human race—to sow weeds among the wheat. But he who awaits the Lord faithfully, once the sleep of infidelity has been banished from him, will not be bothered by this nighttime sower.... According to the Lord's interpretation, the good seed represents the children of the kingdom and the weeds represent the wicked children.

Augustine: The Lord then explained for us what he had said. See what we choose to be in his field. See which of the two we will be at harvest time. The field is the world, and the church is spread throughout the world. Let the one who is wheat persevere until the harvest; let those who are weeds be changed into wheat. There is this difference between people and real grain and real weeds, for what was grain in the field is grain and what were weeds are weeds. But in the Lord's field, which is the church, at times what was grain turns into weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain; and no one knows what they will be tomorrow.

Jerome: As I said before, we must adapt our faith to those things that the Lord explained. Those things which he did not mention and which he left to our intelligence will be briefly touched on here. Think of those who were asleep as signifying the teachers of the different churches. Think of the householder's servants as none other than the angels who daily look upon the Father's face. Think of the enemy who sowed the weeds as the devil because he wanted to be a god.

Augustine: The workers of the householder wanted to go and gather up the weeds, but they were not allowed to do so. Though they indeed wanted to gather them up, they were not allowed to separate the weeds. They did what they were suited for and left it to the angels to do the separation. At first they were unwilling to leave the separation of the weeds up to the angels. But the householder, who knew them all and saw that a separation was necessary, ordered them to put up with the weeds and not to separate them. In answer to their words, "Do you want us to go and gather them up?" he replied, "No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them." "Therefore, Lord, will the weeds also be with us in the barn?" "At harvest time I will say to the reapers, 'Gather up first the weeds, and bind them in bundles to burn. Allow what you do not have with you in the barn to grow in the field.' "

Jerome: The words the Lord spoke—"Lest gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them"—leave room for repentance. We are advised not to be quick in cutting off a fellow believer, for it may happen that one who has been corrupted today by evil may recover his senses tomorrow by sound teaching and abide by the truth. And that which follows, "Let both grow together until the harvest," seems to be contrary to the other precept: "Put away evil from your midst," whereby there must be no fellowship with those who are called believers but who are adulterers and fornicators. If uprooting is

forbidden and patience must be kept until harvest time, how are some people to be removed from our midst? Between wheat and weeds there is something called dandelion, when the plant is in its early growth and there is no stalk yet. It looks like an ear of corn, and the difference between them is hardly noticeable. The Lord therefore advises us that we should not be quick to judge what is doubtful but should leave judgment up to God. So when the day of judgment comes, he may not cast out from the body of saints those who are suspected of misdeeds but those who are obviously guilty. As to his words that the bundles of weeds are to be consigned to the fire and the wheat is to be gathered in the barn, it is clear that all heretics and hypocrites are to be burned in the fires of hell. But the holy ones, who are called wheat, are to be gathered up in barns—that is to say, heavenly mansions.

Chromatius: But when the servants of the householder, namely, on the part of the apostles, ask the Lord whether they should separate the weeds from the wheat, he allowed them both to grow together until the harvest—that is, until the end of time. He clearly indicated that he would send reapers at that time, namely, angels, so that, once they have separated the wheat from the weeds—that is, once the holy ones have been separated from the wicked—they may gather the righteous in heavenly kingdoms, like wheat in barns. All the wicked and sinners will burn amid the punishments of hell like weeds in the fire, where the Lord declares they will forever weep and grind their teeth, saying, “There shall be weeping and grinding of teeth.” And when the Lord says there will be weeping and grinding of teeth, he is undoubtedly pointing to the future resurrection not only of the soul (as certain heretics would have it) but also of the body. Indeed, weeping and grinding of teeth are properly so-called punishments of the body. Therefore the gravity of the error that has a hold on heretics of this type can be seen from these words of the Lord, for they do not believe in the future resurrection of the body.

Chrysostom: He left the crowds and went away. Jesus “went into the house.” And not one of the scribes followed him. From this it is clear that they followed him for no other purpose than to seize him. But when they neglected to listen to his teachings, he let them be.

Chrysostom: When his disciples came to him “asking him concerning the parable of the tares,” it seemed as though they wished to learn but were afraid to ask. What was the source of their confidence to pursue the matter? They had been told, “To you it is given to

know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” So they were emboldened. They asked quietly in private, not so as to circumvent the crowd but to observe the Lord’s wishes. For he had said “to these it is not given.” And why may it be that they let pass the parable of the leaven and of the mustard seed and inquire concerning the weeds? They let those pass because they were easier to understand, but they seemed to be attracted to the theme of the weeds. It seemed to be addressing something more that they still desired to learn. This was the second time Jesus had discussed this theme. They recognized how ominous was the danger it implied. He did not resist them but further elaborated his teaching. And, as I am always saying, the parables must not be explained literally, since many absurdities would follow. This even he himself is teaching us here in thus interpreting this parable.

John Calvin: In order to reap the advantage of this parable, it is necessary to ascertain the object which Christ had in view. Some think that, to guard a mixed multitude against satisfying themselves with an outward profession of the Gospel, he told them, that in his own field bad seed is often mixed with the good, but that a day is coming, when the tares shall be separated from the wheat. They accordingly connect this parable with the one immediately preceding, as if the design of both had been the same. For my own part, I take a different view. He speaks of a separation, in order to prevent the minds of the godly from giving way to uneasiness or despondency, when they perceive a confused mixture of the good along with the bad. Although Christ has cleansed the Church with his own blood, that it may be without spot or blemish, yet hitherto he suffers it to be polluted by many stains. I speak not of the remaining infirmities of the flesh, to which every believer is liable, even after that he has been renewed by the Holy Spirit. But as soon as Christ has gathered a small flock for himself, many hypocrites mingle with it, persons of immoral lives creep in, nay, many wicked men insinuate themselves; in consequence of which, numerous stains pollute that holy assembly, which Christ has separated for himself. Many persons, too, look upon it as exceedingly absurd, that ungodly, or profane or unprincipled men should be cherished within the bosom of the Church. Add to this, that very many, under the pretense of zeal, are excessively displeased, when everything is not conducted to their wish, and, because absolute purity is nowhere to be found, withdraw from the Church in a disorderly manner, or subvert and destroy it by unreasonable severity.

In my opinion, the design of the parable is simply this: So long as the pilgrimage of the Church in this world continues, bad men and hypocrites will mingle in it with those who

are good and upright, that the children of God may be armed with patience and, in the midst of offenses which are fitted to disturb them, may preserve unbroken steadfastness of faith. It is an appropriate comparison, when the Lord calls the Church his field, for believers are the seed of it; and though Christ afterwards adds that the field is the world, yet he undoubtedly intended to apply this designation, in a peculiar manner, to the Church, about which he had commenced the discourse. But as he was about to drive his plough through every country of the world, so as to cultivate fields, and scatter the seed of life, throughout the whole world, he has employed a synecdoche, to make the world denote what more strictly belonged only to a part of it.

We must now inquire what he means by the wheat, and what by the tares. These terms cannot be explained as referring to doctrine, as if the meaning had been that, when the Gospel is sown, it is immediately corrupted and adulterated by wicked inventions; for Christ would never have forbidden them to labor strenuously to purge out that kind of corruption. With respect to morals, those faults of men which cannot be corrected must be endured; but we are not at liberty to extend such a toleration to wicked errors, which corrupt the purity of faith. Besides, Christ removes all doubt, by saying expressly, that the tares are the children of the wicked one. And yet it must also be remarked, that this cannot be understood simply of the persons of men, as if by creation God sowed good men and the devil sowed bad men. I advert to this, because the present passage has been abused by the Manicheans, for the purpose of lending support to their notion of two principles. But we know that whatever sin exists, either in the devil or in men, is nothing else than the corruption of the whole nature. As it is not by creation that God makes his elect, who have been tainted with original sin, to become a good seed, but by regenerating them through the grace of his Spirit; so wicked men are not created by the devil, but, having been created by God, are corrupted by the devil, and thrown into the Lord's field, in order to corrupt the pure seed.