

The Parable of the Wheat

A sermon about our reformation.

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, October 9, 2022

“But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them.'” Matthew 13.29

According to the teachings of the New Church, the Last Judgment is about the “separation of the good from the evil”

(*Apocalypse Explained* 426) for the purpose of “restoring all to order and so re-establishing the spiritual equilibrium between good and evil, or between heaven and hell” (*Last Judgment* 45). When good and evil are not distinguished and separated, there is confusion and disorder – a situation in which evil gains strength. At the time of a Last Judgment the distinctions between good and evil are defined, and the nature of evil is exposed. This drives the “judgment” and restores order and unity.

The parable of the wheat and the tares depicts this process by comparing it with a harvest. Just as wheat and similar but useless plants, which are here called “*tares*,” grow up together in fields, good and bad people exist together in the world. It is difficult to distinguish them. Similarly, good and evil grow up together within every person, and it is not easy to tell them apart. A certain amount of uncertainty and confusion is unavoidable as you grow and change throughout your life. At the time, or the times, that are called “judgment” these things, and these people, are somehow identified and separated.

Charter Day illustrates the parable.

Our topic this morning is the way that things happen over time so that we can make these distinctions. Time is a key element whenever a judgment takes place. If it happens too soon mistakes can be easily made. The parable compares the process to tares not being separated from wheat until the time of harvest.

On this Charter Day weekend we are celebrating

one of these “judgments” or divisions that happened in the history of our church.

From early in the development of the New Church in the United States there was a tension over the exact nature of Swedenborg’s Writings. Were they a complete and infallible Divine revelation, or were they merely a record of things shown to Swedenborg which may not always be exactly true, influenced by his time and culture?

Over time this tension became more pronounced, and in response the Academy was founded in 1874, formally organized in 1876 and received its charter in 1877. It was an effort to lead the general body of the church to a well-informed understanding of the Heavenly Doctrine as the Word of God. Although New Church Education was part of the Academy vision from the start, the vision was mainly a position regarding the nature of the Writings and an effort to guide the church to what they really teach. Over the ensuing years, however, that position was more and more clearly rejected by the general body, and in 1890 the Academy split from Convention and eventually took on the name of the General Church of the New Jerusalem. Since then the name “Academy” has been seen as applying mainly to the schools, but it should be understood that it was originally about the view of the Writings, and that this is a significant part of what we celebrate throughout the church on Charter Day.

In any case, that history is an example of the process described in the parable. Various ideas grow up together, both within each one of us and in our communities, and as we are led by the Lord’s providence, we experience these forks in the road.



The tares are not there by accident.

In the parable a farmer sows wheat in his field, but while everyone was sleeping an enemy sowed tares. The tares were not just naturally occurring weeds but were deliberately planted. They are believed to have been a kind of rye grass called Bearded Darnel, which bears a close resemblance to wheat until the ear appears, and only then the difference is discovered. It grows plentifully in Palestine, making it a good candidate for what the Lord is referring to.

This suggests that the evils that these tares stand for are not the unintentional mistakes that everyone makes as they go through life. They are our deliberate and repeated misdeeds that we need to weed out of our lives. Or they are the harmful ideas and social practices that people promote in our world. Or they are people who don't wish well to others but think only of themselves. In each case they do not just happen, they are intentionally cultivated by the enemy, which is the hells as they work in our lives.

Why are the tares not removed?

The unexpected turn in the parable comes when the farmer tells the workers not to remove the tares while they are still growing "*lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them.*" This makes intuitive sense in the parable since a weed that closely resembles and mixes with the wheat would be hard to remove without damaging the crop.

At the same time farmers and gardeners weed vegetable and flower gardens as a matter of course. The difference would seem to be that most weeds are easy to recognize and can be removed without harm.

The message of the parable is not that we should avoid removing evils from our lives for fear of damaging the goodness in us. Self-examination, repentance, and reformation are ongoing parts of a good life. Instead the message is that good and evil people are mixed together in this world and are not separated until after death for good reason.

Applied to our own lives the message would seem to be that good and evil grow up together within each one of us and may not be successfully separated except over a long period of time. We are told that "*The Lord breaks nobody, but bends him*" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2053), meaning that it can take a

long time for good and evil to be clarified in our minds and lives.

The same thing happens in society as people wrestle with social issues for years. We argue over whether certain things are right or wrong. We argue over the most effective means for dealing with issues even when there is agreement about them.

Fermentation

This was discussed in a sermon here two weeks ago, about the parable of the leaven, a parable that follows that of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13. The message of that parable is that a process like fermentation takes place in societies as they struggle with various issues over time. The leaven is falsity, and when it is inserted into a group it causes the group to struggle and eventually to come to some kind of resolution about it.

This can take a long time in this world, but in the spiritual world it is described as one of the ways that the Last Judgment took place. *Spiritual Experiences* 5222 describes an instance where an evil spirit was sent to a community in the spiritual world and promoted some evil desire. The result was that the community underwent a kind of fermentation as people disagreed over its nature and argued about whether it was right or wrong. Because this took place in the spiritual world those who disagreed with the evil spirit soon turned away from him, and those who liked what he was suggesting turned to face him, and then followed him into hell. The passage says that it looked like they were being drawn in a net and that it was an example of the wheat being divided from the tares.

Our lesson from *Apocalypse Explained* 426 said something similar, describing how when people disagree with each other in the spiritual world they turn away - and then become invisible. It seems like that would be unsettling.

The parable is about human freedom.

The purpose of all of this has to do with human freedom, and especially a kind of freedom that can only exist in the natural world.

In the spiritual world people who disagree cannot remain together but spontaneously move apart or simply disappear from each other. In the spiritual world people can't hold opposing ideas or conflicting desires in one mind.

But in this world we can do this, and we can do it

over long periods of time. The purpose is so that we can examine and understand all sides of questions and issues, experience all kinds of people and practices, and come to free conclusions about what we prefer and what we agree with.

This is the principle associated with this parable, explained in our lesson:

“It is according to Divine order for things that must in the end be separated to grow in connection; and that when the end is reached separation is easily and as it were spontaneously effected.” Apocalypse Explained 911.7

The point is that when things grow together in our minds or in society the differences become apparent over time. Over time there is the opportunity to seriously consider issues and questions and come to conclusions in a way that is sure and solid.

The passage goes on to say:

“This might be illustrated by a thousand lessons of experience in both worlds, and also from correspondences in the animal and vegetable kingdom; from which it can be seen as in a general mirror why the evil were not separated from the good until near the time of the Last Judgment.” Ibid.

Examples of this might be the way that both animals and plants begin their existence as single cells, which multiply and are distinguished into the various parts of each. The same is true of communities, which might begin in one place but then spread out as groups within the community become involved in different uses. Similarly, students in one classroom are educated together, but then move on to different classrooms or schools as they pursue specialized studies.

We recognize the tares through useful service.

As the life of every person progresses this process repeats itself over and over again. Our childhood desires to be rich and famous mature into adult interests in supporting a family and engaging in work that is significant and useful. We come to recognize and reject the purely self-centered aspects

of these desires and become responsible citizens. On the other hand, if our unrealistic childhood dreams were prematurely rooted out the wheat might be removed along with the tares.

Genuine charity and spurious or self-serving charity masquerade as the same things in our minds and can be hard to distinguish. We routinely guide young people by rewards and praise for their efforts and good work. We know perfectly well that their interest in achievement and recognition is not yet a genuine love of uses. But we know that over time they will come to recognize the differences and separate the wheat from the tares.



The farmer said to his servants *“Let both grow together until the harvest.”* While time is an important part of this process the more essential thing is what happens during that time. The growth that is referred to here is about the way that our motivations *“become goods by exercise, that is, by means of uses”* (Arcana Coelestia 6073).

That is, as people devote themselves to useful lives the wheat matures, the tares become more apparent, and as the harvest progresses they can be removed. As our lesson stated: *“when the end is reached separation is easily and as it were spontaneously effected.”* It is *“easy and as it were spontaneous”* because it becomes obvious that it is harmful, whereas it was not obvious before.

We don’t usually see the process, of course, as *“easy”* or *“spontaneous,”* but it is going on all the time in our lives. It is helpful to be able to picture it in the simple terms of a harvest, the rejection of weeds, and the gathering of wheat into barns. It is also helpful to celebrate significant events, as we do on Charter Day weekend, marking a time when an important watershed was reached, when important goals were defined and implemented, and the vision of a future harvest was planted in our minds and hearts. As the Lord says about this harvest:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.” Matthew 5:6
AMEN

Readings from the Word

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. ²⁶ But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. ²⁷ So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn." ³⁴ All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, ³⁵ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world." ³⁶ Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." ³⁷ He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked [one.] ³⁹ The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, ⁴² and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" Matthew 13

A complete separation of the good from the evil takes place at the time of the Last Judgment. It cannot take place before because otherwise the good would perish with the evil; for it is said "lest while you gather up the tares you root up the wheat with them." It is further said "let both grow together until the harvest," that is, until the consummation of the age. The separation of the good from the evil is effected by a gentle and moderate influx of the Divine proceeding from the Lord, while the casting out of the evil into hell is effected by a powerful and intense influx of the Divine.

[4] A few words shall be said about how this separation is effected. When the good are separated from the evil, which is done by the Lord by means of a moderate influx of His Divine, then the Lord causes those who are interiorly and thence also exteriorly good, to turn themselves to Him, and thus to turn themselves away from the evil. When they turn themselves they become invisible to the evil. For this is a common thing in the spiritual world, that when anyone turns himself away from another he becomes invisible to him. When this is done the evil are separated from the good, and at the same time from the sanctity that they had simulated in externals; and thus they look towards hell, into which they are presently cast. *Apocalypse Explained* 426

It is according to Divine order for things that must in the end be separated to grow in connection; and that when the end is reached separation is easily and as it were spontaneously effected. This might be illustrated by a thousand lessons of experience in both worlds, and also from correspondences in the animal and vegetable kingdom; from which it can be seen as in a general mirror why the evil were not separated from the good until near the time of the Last Judgment; and this is the signification of the things in Revelation here explained, that the angel said to Him that sat upon the cloud, "Reap, for the hour to reap is come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." *Apocalypse Explained* 911.7

The Lord compared the Kingdom of God to leaven, to a person gathering tares, and also to a net. All these things are presented visually and seen in the other life. As regards yeast, an evil spirit is sent into societies on mountains or hills, and rouses desires, as a result of which the whole multitude as it were ferments, certain ones acting in unity with him, certain not, certain disagreeing. Those who act in unity (with him) turn their face in that direction, those who do not turn their face away. Then all who turned their face (to him) are gathered into a group and thrown out of the mountain into hell. This is the bundling of the tares. The ones thrown down appear as if dragged in a net, and thus they are brought down to the place where they will be. *Spiritual Experiences* 5222