

Present Realities and Future Certainties

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Date: 21 August 2005

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning we're looking at these two parables in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13, the parable of the wheat and the tares, and the parable of the dragnet. The title is this, Present Realities and Future Certainties.

Over this past year, as a church, you know that we've, on a number of occasions, made offerings to the Barnabas Fund. That is an organization that seeks to help persecuted Christians in various parts of the world, where real and open persecution of the church is common.

And if you read their newsletter, some of you I know do, you'll see that it's very harrowing indeed.

Another similar organization is Release International.

And likewise, their magazine, The Witness, has many similar stories of great harrowing suffering. I was just reading this week stories about six persecuted church leaders in Vietnam who had endured savage beatings and torture.

There was a story of one woman who was so abused in prison that she lost her mind, couldn't even recognize her father. There was a story of a father taken away from his family.

[1 : 18] He was a pastor and was put in prison. Here's what his children said to their mother. Why have the police arrested father? He hasn't committed any crime.

He hasn't killed anyone or stolen anything. So why have they arrested father? What do you think that means to children? But then the lady says, My two sons went on to say to me, We pray that we will grow up quickly, so we can take father's place and serve God.

That extraordinary faith in the place of suffering, it staggers us, doesn't it? Perhaps because we, really in this country, know so little about persecution. At least not yet.

But even in the midst of that kind of bravery, surely the Lord's people facing these things must also ask the question, Why? Why, O Lord?

Why do the wicked seem to prosper? Why don't you do something? How long until you bring justice as you've promised? And we ourselves often ask that question, don't we, as we look at the world and think about our lives?

[2 : 28] We find it hard to understand how God doesn't just do something to sort it all out, to change it. We know as Christians that Jesus has triumphed over evil and sin.

But we don't seem to see enough evidence of it now. We want to see more. Isn't that right? Well, that question isn't new, of course. It's a question that's been asked right through the ages of God's people.

That psalm that we sang, Psalm 73, written hundreds of years before Jesus, expresses exactly the kind of question that the disciples were surely asking as they followed Jesus around, as they heard his message that the kingdom had come on earth.

And yet, as they looked around, there just seemed to be so little in the way of response, so little change in the world, so much evil and wickedness, so much opposition to Jesus.

It's just what the psalmist in Psalm 73 was saying. He says this in verse 2, As for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

[3 : 34] You see, those who scoff at God, those who scorn, they seem to be on the up, gaining more wealth, gaining more power. Whereas the psalmist, he says, I've kept my heart clean.

I've served God. And yet I'm stricken. I'm persecuted. It just seems impossible to understand, to reconcile these things.

Until, he says, until I went into the sanctuary and then I discerned their end. That is, he discerned and understood from God that there is an ultimate day of judgment, that God is just, that he will avenge and he will reward.

And therefore, you see, for the psalmist, in the light of that future certainty, he could live in the trust and obedience to God amid the present realities of a world that seems still very unbearable.

And Jesus' concern in these two parables that we've read this morning is to explain exactly that. To explain to his followers about both these things, about the present reality of the world that we live in, about life in God's kingdom as it is now on this earth, and about the future certainty of what will be the life of his kingdom when it is fully and finally consummated, when he comes in glory.

[5 : 05] And Jesus wants his followers back then and today, he wants them never to be confused about these two things, about what to expect now and what to expect only at that last day and after that day.

If we get confused and mixed up with our expectations about these sorts of things, it will prove absolute disaster for our Christian life. It will prove disastrous for our Christian witness.

It will just mean we cannot persevere with faith when hardship assails us. That's why it's so desperately needed, a chapter like this.

Last time, remember, in the parable of the sower, the very first parable of the kingdom, we saw that God's word is itself his instrument of judgment, of separation of the righteous from the wicked.

And remember, it tells us to be realistic that we're going to see that separation at work in the world as the gospel goes out, as the word of God is proclaimed, it is accepted and it's rejected.

[6 : 09] But now in these two parables, Jesus follows on again on this theme of separation, this division of the world into those who are the children of his kingdom and the sons of the evil one, those who accept and those who are rejected.

And he tells us that although for the most part that division is currently hidden, that one day, one day, it will be absolutely clear, it will be complete and it will be final.

The future, says Jesus, is certain. But at the same time, he's explaining to us why there's a delay in that clarity, why there's a delay in that final unveiling and what we're to expect as normal for Christian believers living now until Jesus comes.

the present realities of the life of the church of Jesus Christ. We must know the future certainties and the present realities. We desperately need to grasp those things.

If we're unrealistic about the present, we'll get lulled into all kinds of false optimism, all kinds of triumphalism in the church. It'll be disastrous.

[7 : 20] But then if we're uncertain about the future, then when reality bites, we'll just get into a spiral of despair. We'll give up. We'll become cynical.

We'll think nothing is ever going to change. So it's vital for Jesus to teach his disciples these two things. To explain to the disciples then what they were seeing in Jesus' ministry and why they weren't seeing what they thought they should see.

But it's just as true for Jesus' disciples today. We also need to understand what we see and what we don't yet see. The parable, the first one there, of the wheat and the tares, is simple enough, isn't it?

And if it wasn't simple enough, well, we've no excuse because in the later verses, verse 36 onwards, Jesus tells us explicitly exactly what it's about. Just look at the story.

It's a story of deliberate sabotage. Out goes the farmer. He sows his good seed. He expects a good harvest. But, well, an enemy comes in.

[8 : 25] No doubt perhaps he's a competitor. It's a story of industrial espionage, industrial sabotage. We see it all the time, don't we? Companies being infiltrated by others, trying to sow damage to knock the share price so they can be taken over by a competitor.

It's very contemporary. So here comes the enemy. He doesn't just come along with his tractor and do a bit of joy riding all around the field to mess it up. No, he's far more subtle than that. He comes in and he sows rival seed, weed seed.

Seed that will have a delayed effect. So nothing's obvious at the beginning, but later on, well, the effect's absolutely devastating. We're told by the commentators, the scholars, that the seed that he sowed was probably darnel.

It's a seed in the wheat family. It's exactly like wheat. It's absolutely indistinguishable from wheat until that is the ears form. And where real fruit has grain, real wheat has grain, the darnel has no usable fruit at all.

In fact, instead of fruit, there's a poisonous fungus in the ears. And then, as verse 26 says, well, then it's suddenly obvious.

[9 : 39] Obvious to everybody. But of course, it's too late to do anything. Perhaps if there was just a few clumps of this weed, well, maybe then you could do some selective weeding. But the implication here is that on this scale, it's just too big a problem.

The roots are all entangled. If you're going to pull out the weeds, well, you'd wreck the whole crop. So no, says the Lord of the harvest, I'm not going to risk destroying my crop.

I'll wait. The sifting, the separation, must wait until harvest time. So both must go on growing together. Both must benefit from the watering, from the fertilizer, from the scarecrows, from the protection.

Both of them will be spared and nurtured together until that day. But then, on that day, oh yes, then there will be a thorough and a complete and a final separation.

There's absolutely no question about it. Do you see there? Verse 30. One lot will go into the barn and the other lot into the fire. And Jesus is perfectly plain.

[10 : 44] He tells us absolutely clearly. He's talking about the separation that's already present in the world, that's hidden between the church of the kingdom, the children of the kingdom, verse 38, and the sons of the evil one.

At the moment, it's not clear. In fact, it's inseparable at times. But one day, that separation will be made absolutely clear and permanent. In verse 47, the parable of the net is exactly the same, although in that parable, all the focus really is on the end, on the separation.

Now, he says, well, like a net in the sea, it's full of all kinds of fish. But then, a clear sorting. The evil, he says, and the righteous. And this, says Jesus, is what explains the world that you live in, the world you experience.

It's the answer to the question, well, why do we see so much evil still in the world today? The answer is, it's all, not because of the neglect of God, but because of his mercy.

Verse 28. Christ's great concern is for his harvest. That's his great goal. Jesus will do nothing to imperil the ultimate destiny of any one of his seeds, any one of his children of the kingdom.

[12 : 05] And that's why he says he cannot and he will not be premature in judgment. We're very impatient, you see, but the Bible tells us, no, God isn't. God is patient. Remember 2 Peter, verse 3?

You think God's slow, but he's not slow. He's merciful. He wants all to come to repentance. Some that you may think look like weeds at the moment, well, they may turn out at the last to actually be fine to be wheat.

It's a warning to us, actually, to be a bit careful in our judgment. Sometimes we can be very premature. God is patient. He wants all to come to our knowledge of the truth.

But further, the Bible also teaches us that God is patient and in his providence he allows evil to flourish at times because he is able to turn the enemy's attacks on him into a cause of blessing, into a purpose of his grace, to prepare his people, to prepare his children of the kingdom for the ultimate blessing at his harvest time.

The present sufferings, remember Paul says in Romans 8, the groanings, these are all things that are working together for the ultimate good of those who love God. Although we can't see it at the present.

[13 : 20] And that's what the sower is eyeing up right from the very beginning. That day is the day that really matters to him above all else. It's the harvest that he's looking towards. And Jesus says, until you see that and unless you see that, unless you're certain about that, you will never, ever be able to understand the present day.

You'll never be able to survive the realities of your life and witness in your present day mission. So in the light of this truth and until the last day and for the sake of God's mercy, good and evil must prosper together side by side, in the light of that, how are we as Christians to live?

How are we to think? How are we to view our mission together as the church? Well, there are two perspectives that follow from this that we must think about.

And the first is this. There can be no misplaced triumphalism in the church of Jesus Christ. We must be wise.

The world is a battleground. It's a war zone and it will be, as we said to the children, right to the very end. There will be conflict and casualties for the people of God without and within the professing church.

[14 : 38] That is the present reality, says Jesus, and you'd better get used to it. There is no place for a misplaced triumphalism ever. Jesus is simply here pinpointing the reality of something that's

been true all the way through the history of God's people, right from the very beginning.

And it will be true right till the end. It's been a story of two seeds right from the start. The children of the kingdom, the sons of the evil one. The conflict and the battle between these two is perpetual and it's inevitable right till the end, says Jesus.

In fact, the Bible's very definition of what it means to be a believer is someone who's in a battle. If you go right back to Genesis 3.15 and the very first gospel promise, just after humanity's first rebellion against God, the rebellion that put all of us under the lordship of the devil, what does God say?

He says, I will put enmity, struggle, between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. That's the first definition in the Bible of what it means to be a believer. I often say that to people. So often when you're struggling in your Christian life, you think you're a failure. God says struggle is the very definition of what it means to be a son of the kingdom. A daughter of the kingdom. I've put that struggle in you against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[16:06] When we get to the very end of our Bible, we'll see it's just the same. The other Sunday evening we're reading Revelation chapter 12. It's describing exactly what Jesus describes here. The time between Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension to glory and his second coming.

And we read that that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan was cast down. But what does he do? Well, he goes on raging and warring against the offspring of the woman, the ones who are faithful to Jesus Christ.

And that goes on and on until the very end. And the devil himself and all of his are destroyed forever. All that fantastic imagery, all that visionary description in Revelation is just saying exactly the same as what Jesus is saying here.

that there will be battles with the devil and his seed and those battles will be fierce and those battles will go right on until the end.

That's why when we read the New Testament letters, just take Ephesians 6, you all know it so well. That's why Paul says your struggle's not just against flesh and blood, but it's against the powers, the authorities, the rulers in the heavenly realms in this present darkness.

[17:19] That's the present reality of the church of Jesus Christ, says Jesus and Paul and everybody else. No false triumphalism. You're in a war and you will be until the end.

All because, verse 28, an enemy is at work. And until the end of the war when Jesus comes to reign, there just can be no other thinking.

And that means we must face up to two things. The first is this, the world will be a very messy place until the very, very end. We know war's messy, don't we? It's too close to home these days.

We're seeing it in Iraq. We're seeing the terrorist bombs. People get hurt in wars. People get caught in the crossfire. It's messy. And then we ask, why can't God end it all now?

We've got to trust his answer. It's because of his great care and concern for his harvest. For the ultimate, perfect, eternal purpose for all of his people in Jesus Christ, for his beloved seed, sons of the kingdom.

[18:31] It's not that God's some kind of unscrupulous general that's sacrificing innocence for some grandiose scheme. No, no, no at all. Not like that. Rather, it's as though God is a careful architect.

He's overseeing a building process and he alone only knows the final beauty and the grandeur and the splendor of what he's building. And the builders in the building site can see only mess at the present time.

They can see shambles. That's all they can see. But he sees the finished picture. And friends, this world is a building site. It's the building site of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. And it's full still of messy things.

And the builders in that site, the servants of the kingdom, you and I, we're going to get messy until the day when we have our new clothes and that building is complete.

And we mustn't have any false expectations about that. We mustn't expect the things of the last days now or we'll despair. Christians are still affected by this messy world.

[19:39] We're not to expect perfect health, perfect healing, all of these things just because we're Christians. We will suffer just as everybody else does.

Because we suffer in the flack, in the crossfire of a world that's still full of sin and evil. We're not to imagine that somehow in our Christian lives we'll ever make such progress that we become

sinlessly perfect now.

No. Whatever experience may be offered to us, whatever seductive claims people may have to give us the secret of victory in the Christian life.

It will never take us out of that battle. As Sinclair Ferguson quoted the other week of Alexander White, it's a serfecht, recht to the end, he said, right to the end.

There's a story of somebody who once went to the great preacher Charles Spurgeon gleefully telling him that he'd been entirely sinless and not even uttered a bad word for the last two months, whereupon Surgeon Spurgeon stamped on his toe and the man shouted a whole bunch of expletives and he said, well that's the end of that then.

[20 : 50] You can say anything you like about Spurgeon, nobody ever knows if it's right or not, but whether that's true I don't know. But it makes the point, we're not to imagine heaven now in our hearts either.

we're not to imagine that Christians will never be caught up in bad things, that we'll be free from accidents, from even violent deaths, from plane crashes, from terrorism, all of these things.

From the tragedies that afflict humankind, the loss of a child, the miscarriages, the premature death of a loved one, the things where we feel that God has robbed us, God says to us, be patient, the world is a messy place, it's going to be like that right till the end.

But trust me, nor are we to harbor ideas that there will ever be perfect conditions for gospel mission, and then everything will be rosy. There are some people who long and long for revival, and that's great, we must all long for revival.

But if we think that that will be the answer to all our problems and everything will then be rosy, we're wrong. It's great sowing that brings about the activity of the enemy.

[22 : 12] So where God is at work, the enemy will be at work. And there will never be perfect, glorious conditions for the growth of the church. I remember being so struck years ago reading the biography of Jonathan Edwards, the great leader of the Great Awakening in North America, and just being absolutely staggered that just four years after being in the middle of that great, extraordinary revival there, he was unceremoniously dumped as the pastor of his church.

Just four years. It's a very salutary lesson for pastors who think revival will bring an end to all their problems. No. There are many folk who believe that there will be before the end, before the coming of Christ, the golden age of the church when the gospel will be triumphant, when many, many, many across the world will come to believe.

Or maybe, but, according to Jesus, if that is the case, it also means that will be a ferocious age of opposition and of enemies and of battles. Right to the end.

Verse 26, it was when the plants came up and began to bear fruit that all of a sudden the weeds appeared no one not to harbor any false triumphalism.

No false expectations of a weed-free age that will be glorious. Not until the very end. And often, you know, thinking like that is just an excuse, isn't it?

[23 : 43] An excuse for not doing what the gospel demands of us now and amongst the mess and amongst the weeds of the present time. We're not to wait for the perfect conditions of the future. Some people with a more social slant on the gospel have this idea that somehow we can attain perfect peace and prosperity in this present age.

Jesus says, no, this world is always going to be messy. There are always going to be enemies until the author of sin himself is destroyed forever. Of course, that is not to say that we are to give up.

It's not to say that we are just to become indolent or indifferent. No, Jesus calls his seed here children of the kingdom. It's our kingdom, he says, not theirs. This world is God's world.

It's his kingdom. Notice that in verse 41, Jesus says that the angels will gather the lawbreakers and the causes of sin out of his kingdom, not vice versa. There's not going to be some kind of rapture gathering believers out of this world and leaving this world to go on.

That's the opposite of what Jesus says here. You may be seeing some of these books called Left Behind. There's a whole series of them, very popular, all about that. Some of you, I know, were brought up in backgrounds where as children, you were taught that theology.

[25 : 05] You lived in fear that one day you'd come home from school and your parents would have been raptured and you'd be left. That's not what Jesus says. It's the evil that's going to be plucked up and taken away out of his kingdom.

Look, Jesus' kingdom has begun right here on the earth, he says. When he comes again, it's going to be the earth that's swept clean and all the evil removed. 2 Peter 3 is very clear about that. He says it's going to be just like the days of Noah when in those days the earth was destroyed by the flood but the same earth came out of it renewed. So at the last day this earth is going to be destroyed in that way, swept clean by fire and a new heavens and earth renewed. So there's no excuse, Jesus says, no excuse for hiding away in a little holy huddle, waiting for some kind of rescue. No, says Jesus, this is my kingdom. This is your kingdom. You are the children of the kingdom. Despite the presence of evil growing in it, you are to grow as well. You are to grow in advance and be fruitful in my field until the harvest time. [26 : 11] But not with any false delusions. Recognizing always that only at that very last day will the struggle be over.

The world will be a messy place until the end but there's another thing we have to come to terms with and that's this. Not just the world but the church is going to be a messy place right until the end. Sometimes people want to deny this but Jesus is absolutely clear. We can't deny the fact that the weeds here are right in amongst the wheat tangled up with them. That's part of the whole problem. You can't always tell which is which. It's just like the parable of the sower only at the harvest day. The presence or absence of fruit is what makes it clear. And it's inevitable you see because it's the presence of the good seed that attracts the enemy. That means that wherever the gospel is at work bringing the children of the kingdom to birth always the enemy will be at work.

[27 : 12] Wherever the dragnet of the church is active in the sea of the world will be pulling in all kinds of fish. We often think there's a lot of funny fish in the church well this is what explains it.

Peter is very clear in his letter 2 Peter 2 false prophets always grew up in Israel's past he said and so it will be with you false teachers will arise. the New Testament is so full of warnings against falsehood and false teachers in the church it will be pointless to warn them if they weren't there causing trouble.

The whole witness of the New Testament is to that and sometimes we have to admit that it's true that it's hard to see perhaps individually sometimes although it's very easy to see the effect on the overall crop of poisonous teaching and so on.

Notice in verse 41 Jesus calls them causes of sin stumbling blocks literally they trip people up in their sin they're law breakers he says because they teach against God's clear word well that's what we see in the church today isn't it?

Plenty of evidence of that people who want to rewrite the Bible edit the Bible call sin a legitimate lifestyle choice make people trip up and Jesus says the message for us when we see this going on is not to throw up our hands in horror not to retreat into a ghetto as though we can try and make ourselves pure friends if you want to go and find a church that is absolutely perfect and pure let me tell you you will never find it and if you did you will spoil it no says Jesus but then he doesn't say either we're to we're to throw up our hands in despair and give up hope as if everything's lost no the master is in control he says yes he may be allowing evil to grow alongside at the moment but he wants his good seed to grow and his good seed will grow and there will be a magnificent harvest so be patient endure grow and bear fruit that's your job in this present age no misplaced triumphalism but on the other hand no wrong pessimism again and again in the New Testament we're told that the mark of the

[29 : 39] Holy Spirit at work is not froth not instability it's patient endurance Paul says we're saved in hope we wait for it with patience that's what Jesus is calling us to here go on be realistic about the present he says but be certain about the future God will have his harvest and who knows many perhaps much that is presently uncertain may seem to be weeds may seem to be a lost cause for the sake of Christ well at the harvest day may very well be that many weeds have been transformed by the grace of God into true wheat God has promised a harvest and we need to keep that before us otherwise we will never be able to live in the midst of a messy world and a messy church but the second perspective is this if there's to be no false triumphalism for the church there is certainly to be no false security for the world

Jesus is absolutely crystal clear here isn't he there will be an end there will be a great and decisive separation look at verse 30 the reaper separates the weeds for burning and the wheats for the storehouse verse 48 the fisherman separates the fish and separates them into good and bad and it's final it's certain it is irreversible all causes of sin and law breakers cast out of his kingdom there

will be no place for them ever again when his kingdom is ready and when it's complete so the enemies of God may look to be in the ascendant and they may think that they're on the ascendant but says Jesus there is a day of judgment coming and that judgment will be stark it will be absolute it will be permanent there is no reason for any false security for the world it's strange isn't it how we find the judgment of God such an offensive idea today

I told you before I think of an assistant minister going to a church and was told you are never to mention hell or judgment on Sundays lest it offends people and we are offended aren't we we are offended by this whole idea of God being a judge and yet at the same time we all clamor for justice we want justice in this world don't we fighting injustice is such a powerful political weapon today a great force in world affairs depending on your politics of course it will be different things that drive you maybe personal things we have just seen in the newspapers all this week about the family of this Brazilian man clamoring for justice it's what they see as injustice and everybody clamors for justice even in our prisons there's a pecking order isn't there that's why rapists and child molesters have to be separated to protect them from the rough justice of the other inmates they want justice just as we do and we want prison for sex offenders don't we many of us want more than prison we want the death penalty for them