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The Divine Caution against Puritan Over-zeal
for Church Purity.

SERMON

from the Parable of The Tares of the Field

PREACHED TO A CONFERENCE OF NEIGHBOR CHURCHES AT LISBON, CONN.,
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SERMON.

Matth. xiii, 36. Explain unto us the parable of The Tares of the Field.

The story itself was plain enough, even to the plainest of plain people. The farmer had sown good wheat; but some malicious person had scattered over it the seeds of a mischievous weed—a degenerate wheat so like the good, in blade and stalk, that you could not distinguish it with certainty, until it had headed. And this, said the Great Teacher, was like what the kingdom of heaven was going to be—that reign of God on earth which he had come to inaugurate.

And this saying is one of the distinctively divine words of the Christ—the words that are unlike the human way of talking. It is the way of the social reformer to be hopeful, sanguine, optimist. The visions of reconstructed society under his proposed régime are bright and rose-tinted. Recent history records many such generous and noble hopes; and records also the pathetic disappointment of them. But here is the greatest of all social reformers, the boldest, the most far-seeing, the most self-sacrificing, refusing to indulge either himself or his disciples in any such cheering illusions. He has come to institute the Reign of God. But the vision of that coming kingdom, as it spreads itself before his spiritual gaze, is like a field of growing grain in which the good and the bad are hopelessly intermingled, and it is forbidden to make the vain attempt to separate them. Did ever the projector of a social revolution that should renew the face of the earth, begin with announcing such a program, whether before or since?

Now if we would be taught of the Lord, in this parable, we must hold our attention fixed upon the main point that he has in view, and not be distracted by incidental applications that suggest themselves. Obviously,

1. The parable is not intended to solve the philosophical difficulties concerning the Origin of Evil. The reference to diabolic agency throws no light whatever on these difficulties, but only removes them one step further back.
2. The object of the parable is not to show the personality of the devil. It gives us an incidental glimpse of this fact; but this is not the aim of it.
3. The parable is not meant to teach the future destruction of this world; and not only is not meant to teach it, but actually does not teach it, except as it is misinterpreted and inexcusably mistranslated. "The field," said our

Lord, is the world; and the harvest is, the end of"—what? The end of the field? Nothing of the kind. The harvest is not the end of the field; and the Great Teacher has never said any such foolish thing. The harvest is the end of the season; and that is what our Lord unmistakably says, by an emphatic change of word which our timid revisers are without excuse for not clearly expressing, instead of just hinting it in the margin. The harvest, says our Lord, is the conclusion of the present period of time. That is all.

4. The object of the parable is not to teach the doctrine of future punishment. For this very reason the solemn words with which it closes do teach it the more impressively. But we must not let the incidental lessons, however important, distract us from the main point of the story. And the main point of it is this:

IN GOD'S KINGDOM ON THE EARTH, BAD MEN WILL BE MINGLED WITH THE GOOD BEYOND THE POWER OF THE CHURCH TO DISTINGUISH THEM.

Under the eye of Jesus himself, there was an eight per cent. of treason among the disciples. In those early days of poverty and persecution to which we are accustomed to look back for an example of purity, the church was infested with Ananiases, and Demases, and Diotrepheses, and Simons. Certainly things grew no better when the church was taken under Cesar's patronage and became the persecutor in its turn. And if any, charmed by the visions of the Apocalypse, are looking for the "thousand years" as a time of absolute purity in the church, they will do well to scrutinize more closely the conditions of that reign of the saints; they will see, even then, the germs of a great apostasy incubating among the evangelized nations, that shall by and by show themselves in a mad rebellion against Messiah, beleaguering the camp of the saints and the beloved city. Not till the winding up of the age is the severing between good and evil to be completed.

From this point of doctrine—the continued imperfection of the church—there are three great lessons to be deduced, to one of which our Lord distinctly points, and others which he leaves us to find for ourselves:—a lesson of church duty, a lesson of personal caution, a lesson of encouragement and hope.

I. A lesson of church duty. With earnest emphasis which leaves us without excuse for mistaking his meaning, the Founder of the church teaches that the discipline of his church must proceed on the principle of not rooting up the wheat. He certainly does not teach that there is to be no discipline in the church. For the administration of such discipline he himself and the apostles in his name have given explicit instructions. But we may not assume to put out, or to keep out, from our fellowship any, however feeble or fruitless seeming, of whom we cannot confidently say that the Lord himself hath condemned him. It is better that ten unworthy should be received, than that one imperfect child of God should be excluded—better that the field should be choked with tares, than that one blade of stunted wheat should be torn up and flung to wither. If this seems to any an unwise laxity of organization, exposing the church to infections of error and evil practice, we are not careful to answer the objection. The foolishness of God is wiser than men.

Two reflections are suggested by the duty thus inculcated.

1. It does not hurt the faithful Christian who has done his full duty up to the narrow limit of his responsibility, if, in spite of all, hypocrisy undetected does stand beside him in the temple and sit with him at the holy table. The publican whispering "God be merciful," went down to his house justified none the less for the Pharisee that stood there saying, "God, I thank thee." Beloved John's communion was not the less sweet, upon the bosom of his Lord, for the hand of the traitor that was upon the table. It is a monstrous and arrogant assumption to forsake the assembling together, as the manner of some is, on the ground that others are there unworthily.

2. We cannot but reflect on the worth of the feeblest saint to his Savior. He is so much more tender in his regard for the feeble than we his disciples are. We do not mind it so very much, if, for some important object—the purity of the church, the prevention of scandal, the security of sound doctrine, we root up a little of the wheat. The church has a right—so some are not ashamed openly to say—a right to lay down rules and conditions of communion, even though they may bear hardly on particular cases. Here, for instance, was the monstrous evil of slavery, burrowing into the very life of the nation, demoralizing our politics, infecting the whole fabric of society. In such a case, is it not right for the church to lay down a general rule excommunicating all masters of slaves? Doubtless there are some faithful, conscientious Christians among them; but then it would not root up but a little wheat, and think how many tares you would get rid of. "All right," shouted the multitude of zealots. "No communion with slaveholders! It is better that a few innocent and upright persons should suffer injustice, and that the whole nation perish not." But what says the Lord of the church? "See ye do it not; whosoever shall offend one of the least of these that believe on me, it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea."

Or, for another instance: here is a serious error in Christian doctrine, that seems to be of dangerous tendency. Some wise men perceive it; some good men deplore it; but there are some honest Christians who are drawn into sympathy with it, and led away from a safe and wise statement of religious opinions. The cause of truth is in danger. Is it not right to use severe measures in defending it? Is it not right to draw up a standard of sound doctrine as a condition of admittance to our fellowship? To be sure, those whom it would exclude are just those to whom the fellowship of Christian brethren is most important. But is it not best that these should be sacrificed to the interests of sound doctrine? Yea, say some of the servants of the husbandman, let us go and gather them up. But the husbandman himself says, "Nay, lest ye root up the wheat with them. I will not have you imperil one of the least of these for whom I died. I have paid for them too dearly. Rather my name and my church should be reproached, rather the company of my chosen ones should be profaned by the unworthy, than that one of these little ones should perish. Stay your zeal, my servants. This stunted blade may bear its kernel or two of good corn yet; and that flourishing stalk may show

the black ear by and by, when the summer sun shall smite it. Take heed how any one of you mischance to hurt my little ones. Let them alone. Tares and wheat must grow together, till the harvest."

II. The second lesson deduced from the parable is a lesson of personal caution. Let us remember, let us faithfully impress on others, that there is no assurance of salvation in the mere fact of church-membership. Dear friends, is there one of us here that is not waiting, longing, praying, eagerly hoping for an ingathering into these churches of such as are being saved? These later years have not been years of abundant harvest. The last year's record is a dismal record for these six churches; as we ministers look about from the pulpit, we see the young men and young women who ought to be the growing strength of the church, mere spectators of our communion—not sharers; or perhaps we do not see them at all, because they are not there. And yet, as we anxiously note each hopeful sign of quickening interest, have we no misgivings as to possible illusions that may attend upon it? I confess to you how seriously I fear the false impressions that may proceed from our usage of the examination of candidates for church fellowship, by a committee appointed to that function. Following the analogies to which we are accustomed in other relations, how perilously easy the impression on the mind of the novice that he has been examined by experts as to his symptoms, and that the diagnosis is all right; that he has presented himself, and passed, and received his certificate, and is entitled to be enrolled among the elect! How important to hold up faithfully, before the conscience not only of young members but of older members, the teaching of the parable of The Tares of the Field! The church, let it be understood, issues no certificates of regeneration. It keeps no list of those who have ceased to be probationers; we are every one of us members on probation, even to the end. Let us beware how we judge another's servants; to his own Master each must stand or fall; and God is able to make him stand. Let us walk humbly with God, trusting him the more unreservedly as we learn to have no confidence in ourselves.

III. And the final lesson to be drawn from the parable is the cheerful lesson of confidence and hope—confidence in the church that now is, hope for the church that is yet to be. Does it seem strange to you that this disheartening parable of The Tares of the Field, which must have struck a chill to the eager enthusiasm of those who first heard it, can have anything of comfort and cheer for those who should come after them? But think of it! If these had not been taught at the outset not to hope too much, they must have utterly despaired in the sequel. With what bright expectations they went forth on the last commission of their ascended Lord! Their minds were full of the things which they had seen and heard and their hands had handled of the Word of Life. Slow of heart to believe, their doubts had been scattered by the radiant presence of the Master. Nothing doubting of the promise, they had waited at Jerusalem till the tokens of God's presence filled the room, and from the baptism of the divine Spirit they came forth endued with power. At the name that is above every name, the eyes of the blind were opened, the tongue of the dumb did sing, and the lame man leaped as a hart. Words of strange languages flowed from the lips of the unlearned, that barbarous ears might hear the wonderful works of God; and to the slow of speech was opened

a door of utterance. The devils were subject to them, and the minds of proud and willful men were brought low, by the words of the weak and foolish whom God had chosen. Even the rage of the enemies of the kingdom wrought the praise of its Lord and Christ. In every direction the witnesses to the resurrection were driven by the hot breath of persecution; and whithersoever they went, the memory of the power and purity of the Pentecost church attended them, and these were renewed in other lands. Surely the day of the prophet's vision was dawning, when the earth should be wholly consecrated to its Lord; when, not alone on priestly robes and frontlets, and on sacrificial vessels, but on all articles of common household use, should be written *Holiness to the Lord*; and even the vehicles of commerce should bear the same mark of ownership, and from long caravans of gainful traffic, as they drew near to city gates, the sweet bells of horses and camels should be heard chiming *Holiness to the Lord*. Were not these the living proofs that the church was God's own garden—the fact that it hid no roots of bitterness, and that its springing blades showed themselves wholly a right seed?

Now let a few months go by, and let them look again on the field which they have tilled. In that most cherished center of happy and hopeful apostolic labor, the church of Corinth, abounding in spiritual gifts, there had sprung up a spirit of strife and vain-glory; heresies the most perilous and fundamental had been rife; and flagitious crimes, not so much as named among the Gentiles, were practised in their fellowship without rebuke. From Jerusalem itself there must needs go forth to the churches of the dispersion such an indignant remonstrance against their corruptions as the most sad Epistle of James. Where are now your hopes of the blessed kingdom? How unlikely that this field growing black with tares as the harvest comes on apace, can be that planting of the Lord whose fruits were to shake like Lebanon, and whose sheaves were to be brought back with rejoicing and the song of Harvest Home! Has Christ a real church in the world? Have not the gates of hell prevailed? Has the Lord been faithful to that parting promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end?" In the midst of disheartening doubts like these, common in every age of the church, there comes to mind that word of Christ, that even such the kingdom of heaven was to be. Instructed by this word, they find in all these sights and sounds of evil—the voice of discord among brethren, the blemish of the unworthy at the feast of charity, the shouting of the scoffers as the latter days draw nigh—in all these, the warrant of fresh confidence in Christ. If the desire of their hearts had been fulfilled, and the church had grown up without spot or wrinkle, the word of Christ would have been discredited. But now these very imperfections—these mixtures of infirmity and sin and even willful hypocrisy, which cavilling voices object against the church, are a credential of its claims. It is a divine wonder that with such corruption burning like a fire in the midst of her, she is not consumed. Turn aside, O mockers, and see this great thing! Put your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy!

But this is not all. These mixtures of earthly imperfection are not only a credential of the church's claims, they are a promise of its coming glory. They are not for ever; they are only "until the harvest." The things that are in part are always a prophecy of the perfect which is to come. There

comes to my mind a tale out of the Jewish Talmud, how that in the days of Zion's uttermost desolation, there were standing amid its neglected ruins three rabbis, when before their eyes, a fox leaped out from the very site of the sanctuary. At this sign of ruin and desecration, the two old men lifted up the voice and wept; but young Rabbi Akiba laughed. And when they questioned him with reproachful looks, he answered: "I was thinking of the prophet's word, 'Because of the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it;' and I took courage at the thought, if the threatenings of woe are so exactly executed, how abundantly shall be fulfilled the glorious things that are spoken of thee, O city of God!" One prophecy has ever been the token of the fulfillment of another. Thus the predicted shadows that fall so dark about us, bring out in strong distinctness before believing eyes the vision of that promised Holy City into which shall enter nothing that defileth. It surely is to come. Descending from God out of heaven, it shall dwell with men. Even now, heavy and dark as are the clouds that overhang us, the jasper and sapphire of its twelve foundations seem to pierce the firmament. These things that are in part—when shall they be done away, and that which is perfect come? When shall the church be delivered from its bondage into its glorious liberty?

O mother dear, Jerusalem,
 When shall we come to thee?
 When shall our sorrows have an end?
 Thy joys when shall we see?

Brethren of the Conference: It is not without a distinct purpose of bringing the divine teaching to bear upon besetting mistakes and temptations of our own churches, that I have thus emphasized the neglected lessons of the parable of The Tares of the Field. The story of how the servants of the Husbandman, in the New England churches, felt themselves impelled to a disproportionate zeal in the rooting up of tares, is an honorable story. They had come forth from a political church in England, in which, notoriously and scandalously, hardly any pretense of discipline remained, except the persecution of faithful Christians for their faithfulness to Christ. No wonder that, in laying foundations for a new nation, they should go to the extreme of caution lest like conditions should again prevail. To the extreme they did go. And the consequence has been just what our Lord predicted and forbade. There has been good wheat rooted up from the field. In our shrewd precautions, we have been wiser than the foolishness of God. The weak in faith we have received to doubtful disputations, or have refused to receive them at all. We have multiplied the number of true believers standing outside of church fellowship, and by their blameless living presenting a visible argument of the unimportance of church communion. We have sanctioned and even necessitated the division of Christ's one church into sects. We have laid stumbling-blocks before the feet of "little ones that believe in Christ." It is time for us to turn from our traditions to the example of the apostles and the commandments of our Lord.

THE DOOR OF THE CHURCH.

A PAPER READ AT THE SAME CONFERENCE.

I shall assume that this theme on which I am requested to speak is meant to refer to the forms of public solemnity by which persons should be received to full membership in the church. I do not despair of enunciating some points on which we shall be unanimously agreed.

1. It is wholly right and fitting that the first approach of Christian disciples to the Lord's Table should be marked by public acts worthy of so important and affecting an occasion.

2. The principal and central act of these solemnities should be the confession of faith in God, our Maker, our Redeemer, and our Sanctifier; so that it should be manifest to all that this is the one main and simple condition of our fellowship.

3. It is not a fit occasion for exacting from the candidates for church fellowship a statement of their views in systematic theology. (1) Because the candidates are not of an age or of antecedents such as to give value to their opinions on the topics of a dogmatic system. (2) Because the use of dogmatic formulas under the title of Confessions of Faith tends to promote the pernicious error that Faith consists in holding certain doctrinal views. The reasons for not exacting from the candidates their own statement of doctrinal views, are still stronger reasons for not requiring from them assent to doctrinal statements drawn up by other persons.

4. A most fitting part of this solemnity is the public vow of self-consecration to the service of Christ in his church. To be sure, this vow, as well as the confession of our faith, is openly implied by each of us every time we approach the Lord's table. This is why we call the Lord's Supper a *sacramentum*, or oath of fidelity. But how natural and becoming it is that at the first approach to the Lord's table this vow should be not only implied but explicit, has been felt in all parts of the universal church.

But with this vow of unreserved fidelity to Christ, it is not right to do, what nevertheless is often done—to take this opportunity of enforcing on the candidate other people's interpretations and applications of the law of Christ, by means of pledges or abjurations incorporated in the church covenant.

5. Withal, it is right and becoming that with this vow of the new-comer there should go a public act of welcome on the part of the brotherhood of the church.

And yet even here we need to be on our guard lest these wholly right and reasonable acts be perverted by a false and mischievous interpretation. The innocent forms of the covenant—the vow of the candidate, the welcome of the brethren—have sometimes been construed to support the unscriptural and unchristian notion that the church of our Lord is nothing more than a voluntary club, on which the charter members are at liberty to impose such restrictions as they think fit, admitting or excluding at their own discretion or caprice; and into which, since they are not bound to admit, therefore the individual disciple is not bound to enter; and that the mutual duties of Christians in church fellowship are originated and limited by the stipulations of the voluntary mutual compact. There can be no doubt that this degenerate and Jacobin type of Congregationalism has sometimes prevailed in New England, and has produced lamentable results. It becomes us all to be on our guard against it.

