

The Parable of the Weeds, Part One

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The parable of the weeds (tares) in the Holy Bible is full of lessons and meanings. Christ told this parable to his disciples, saying:

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Matt. 13:24-30)

When the Lord explained the parable to His disciples, He said: The sower is Christ, the field is the world, the good seed is the children of the kingdom, the weeds are the children of the devil, the enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil, the harvest is the end of the world, and the reapers are the angels (Matt. 13:36-39).

If we expand a little on Christ’s interpretation of the parable, we conclude that the world has good and bad people, and that God does not allow a final punishment for the bad at present, lest the good perish with them: “Not lest in gathering up the tares you root up the wheat” (Matt. 13:28). However, He disciplines them, in many and various ways, with the aim of awakening them and returning them to the right path, and consequently, to their salvation.

This reminds us of the divine punishment of the city of Sodom (Gen. 18). When Abraham learned of it, he said to the Lord: “Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous in the city. Will you destroy the whole city and not spare it for the fifty righteous in it?” And the Lord said: “If I find fifty righteous in Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Abraham began to reduce the number until he reached ten. Finally, he was forced to remain silent, because there were not ten righteous people in the city.

A number of the Church Fathers and commentators say that God allowed the weeds to grow in order to give them a chance to become wheat. God allows the wicked to exist and does not destroy them because, in the abundance of His love, He gives them time to reform and repent. This also reminds us of the words of the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel: "Is my pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God? No, but in his repentance from his wickedness he will live" (Ezek. 18:23). It also reminds us of the words of the Gospel: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt. 9:12).

This teaches us, firstly, that evil and wicked people exist in the world. Believers should not be distressed by their presence in this life! They should rather have compassion for them because they need salvation. But accepting their presence does not mean following them and going along with them in their corruption and evil. On the contrary, believers must always be vigilant to keep themselves from falling into corruption and evil. Their duty is, first of all, to refrain from doing evil and to constantly repent, as the Lord asks in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes; cease from doing evil" (Is. 1:16).

Secondly, it teaches us that the believer is called to contribute to the realization of God's goal, namely, the salvation of mankind. This contribution can only be achieved through setting and modeling a good example, since speaking, preaching, teaching, and building institutions, etc. are means, not goals. And all of these do not affect others unless they come from pure and honest people who walk in the commandments, piety and fear of the Lord.

Therefore, the Orthodox Church places special emphasis on repentance and the inner dimension of the Christian life. A person can generally fulfill all the commandments outwardly without penetrating his inner self. This is what the Pharisees were like at the time of Christ. It is clear from the Holy Gospel that the Lord was not as harsh with anyone as He was with these hypocritical believers, I mean the Pharisees, whom he described as "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all kinds of filth. And so, you appear righteous to men, but inside you are all hypocrisy and evil" (Matt. 23:27-28).

The Apostle Paul says to the Church of Corinth: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with the immoral, not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the ungodly, or thieves, or idolaters; otherwise, you would need to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9). This means that believers live in this world; not in isolation from it, but in it. However, they are distinguished by not going along with it and what is incompatible with the values and essence of their faith. They deal with people with love and sobriety, based on the values of their gospel. They do not judge those who are different from them, nor do they destroy them, either physically or spiritually. They strive to be faithful to the teachings of their Christ, their faith, and their witness to their Lord. They accomplish all this with a blameless life. If there is a deficiency due to human weakness, they quickly correct it.

They are aware that they are witnesses of their faith in the middle of society, so they do not participate in what contradicts their faith. They abstain from sins, evils and crimes, even if their entire society follows them. They remain faithful. To the extent that their conduct is blameless, they tell, without intruding on the lives of others, of the joy and sweetness of their faith.

The Chinese Communist Revolution forbade the nuns who served in hospitals from speaking to the sick. It happened that a senior official in one of these hospitals was admitted in critical condition. After seeing the nuns' tenderness and dedication to serving the sick, he said to their superior, in astonishment: "How loving is your God, that you are so loving!" This later encouraged the officials to ask Mother Teresa of Calcutta to open branches of her congregation, the "Missionaries of Charity," in China, which was a country closed to evangelization. (This did not happen because she insisted that her nuns remain in Indian attire, while the Chinese asked them to wear Chinese attire.)

A pastor who served in China in the first decade of this century told me that Christianity was spreading rapidly there. The government, which had previously persecuted churches, was now encouraging its people to go to church because it noticed that churchgoers were not committing suicide. China suffers from a high rate of suicide among its people.

Christ commanded his disciples, and through them all His followers in the world: "Be My witnesses in Jerusalem and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This was His last commandment before He ascended to heaven. Therefore, pure

conduct and absolute faithfulness in keeping His teachings were at their peak among the Christians of the first centuries.

Those Christians did not say: We live in a hostile environment that hates Christ and us, so let us isolate ourselves and live alone, and let us go where Christ is loved! Rather, they cut off the world's filth and its evils. In a world that was endlessly licentious, they preserved their chastity. And the slaves among the immoral served their corrupt masters with all devotion and loyalty. Thus, Christians leavened the pagan Roman Empire with the leaven of the gospel, and returned it – with their blood, sweat, and pure spiritual commitment – to Christ.

The Parable of the Weeds, Part Two

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We have said that the presence of weeds (tares) with wheat until the last day (Matt. 13:23-30) makes Christians witnesses of their faith, thus allowing them to contribute to the work of the salvation of the world.

What is striking about Christ's interpretation of the parable is that he considers the field a symbol of the world, not the Church. If the world will continue to contain the righteous and the corrupt, what about the Church? How do we apply this parable to her? Do we accept the existence of the wicked on an equal footing with the righteous? The Church is the leaven and salt of the world, "But if the salt has lost its taste, with what shall it be seasoned?" (Matt. 5:13). There is no place for the corrupt and the wicked in the Church, because in principle it is a community of saints; a community of people who have dedicated themselves to God. But in reality, they still sin and have not attained perfection; even though they are on the way to it. Therefore, the Church is also a community of repentant people who strive for holiness and perfection (definition from St. Ephraim the Syrian).

Repentance means continuous self-correction. The one who refuses to change himself and is stubborn in his sin has no place in the Church. The process of purification and cleansing is continuous and active in the Church. It is a permanent dialectical process that requires great spiritual awakening and vigilance, on the one hand, and support for the repentant on the other hand. That support should be equal in strength to zeal for the purity of the Church.

The Church is the living body of Christ, not a field. It is His vineyard, and believers are in existential union with Him. "And every branch of it that does not bear fruit He takes away" (John 15:2). The Lord said in another place: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 7:19). Regarding the quarrel between members of the Church (Matt. 18:15-18), the Lord instructed recourse to the Church, after exhausting the solutions of reconciliation, on the personal level and on the level of mediators. He said: "If he (the erring brother) refuses to listen to them (the mediators and witnesses), tell it to the Church. But if he refuses to listen to the Church, treat him as if he were a heathen or a tax collector."

On these verses and others, the Church based its canon law that aims to organize its existence in the world in accordance with its heavenly essence. Saint Basil the Great says: "If those who call themselves Christians wanted to continue preserving the gospel truth, the apostolic tradition, and the simple faith, I would not have had to speak; rather, I would have remained silent." Apologetical theology and the canons that discipline, refine, correct, and excommunicate exist because of the human face of the Church, to keep it faithful without lowering it and allowing it to distort the face of Christ and repel Him.

God sent the prophet Jeremiah to his people, and gave him a double message, saying to him: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth, and have given you authority this day over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). Isn't this the message of the Church?

There is, then, a distinction in the way believers deal with those outside the Church and those within it. Those within it are not allowed to indulge in vices after exhausting all means to help them repent. If the sinner or the lost persists in his sin, the Church disciplines him. Discipline takes many forms and stages: it begins with admonition, then warning, then punishment, then temporary excommunication, and final excommunication. This is evident in the letters of Paul the Apostle, which organized the newly emerging local churches and embodied the words of the Gospel in ecclesiastical reality.

I will give just one example concerning that brother who was cohabiting with his stepmother. The Apostle Paul says: "It would have been better for you to mourn, so that you might remove from your midst the one who has done this deed... Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his body, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:1-5). What is meant is, cut him off from the Church because he persists in his sin, so that his sin may wear down his body, so that he may come to his senses and repent. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), when he was in extreme need, he remembered the glory of his father's house, so he returned to it!

The Apostle Paul continues in his letter to the church at Corinth, saying:

"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or

idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother (i.e., a believer within the church) if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Drive out the wicked person from among you’” (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

There are cases in which dialogue, consideration and compassion stop working. These require excommunication, that is, expulsion from the Church. The Church resorts to this after exhausting all means of reform, whether moral, behavioral, faith-based or sacramental, and the sinner persists deliberately on continuing in his sin or error. At that point, he becomes a stumbling block for others, and a misleading and distorted image of Christ. He must be removed from the ecclesial family lest he destroy it and cause its destruction.

The Church is both mother and father. It educates, nurtures, and cares for, and also disciplines, punishes, and refines. Its goal is to edify mankind for whose salvation Christ died and rose.

God will judge the corrupt in this world on the last day, but the Church will hold accountable the sinners within it to encourage them to repent while preserving its purity. There is no compromise or deviation, whether in faith or behavior.

In a time of looseness and competing influences on those who are called believers, accountability does not seem as easy as discussed. Complacency is unacceptable, and healing is required. Haste is harmful, and patience is needed. In the end, discipline is not merely legalistic but pedagogical for the sinner and the brethren. It requires invoking the Holy Spirit through deep prayer.

In a time of insistence on clinging to religious formalities and fighting their essence simultaneously, the Church needs a prophetic spirit and collective action to limit corruption that runs here and there. Separating the wheat from the weeds, after they have ripened, is not a difficult matter. The difficulty lies in the time of growth, that is, before reaching maturity.

Certainly, the more the Church is filled with pure people, the less corruption it will have. In the end, we are all responsible, and we will be judged for our evasion of responsibility in one way or another.

Take care of your purity so that your Church will be better!