

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

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“Wheat and Weeds”

Dear ones,

Are “tares” tearing you up?

I’m sure you’re familiar with Jesus’ story about the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13. Tares were weeds that an enemy had strewn in a well-planted field of wheat. When the seedlings grew, you couldn’t tell the difference. But when maturity came you had the difference between golden grains of wheat that were the staff of life, and poisonous little black seeds that had no good purpose at all.

Tares still grow among the wheat.

I don’t want anyone to see my garden and my flowerbeds this year. They are normally beautiful and manicured. This year, because of lots of extra work, travel, and illness, they are weed patches. The weeds have definitely choked out the good things. I’m embarrassed and horrified by it.

I’m still amazed at how easy it is for weeds to grow. You don’t have to plant them, cultivate them, or even water them! They just grow! You see weeds growing on rocky ledges, in desert sands, and in salty marshes where you could never get good plants to grow. Weeds seem to grow without effort or help.

In Jesus’ story he was not giving a lecture on horticulture but talking about different kinds of people. Some people are productive and beneficial. Some are like weeds!

I’ve known a few weeds in my time. And most of them have been in the church. Some have been church leaders!

I’ve met some horrendous people in the church. I know that sounds unkind. I appreciate what Will Rogers said: “I’ve never met a man I didn’t like.” But I’ve known some people that Will never met! I don’t think he would have liked them either.

Why is it that dysfunctional people can be so hearty? How is it that they survive when good people all around them don’t? It may be an urban myth, but I’ve heard that even in nuclear blasts cockroaches still survive. There are people that just seem to go on destroying and destroying without any accountability for their sins.

Well this is a cheery note!

Let me tell you why I wrote it. I was just walking around my house and shaking my head over the abundance of weeds, when the phone rang for the sixth time this week telling me about some churches where the weeds triumphed over the wheat again. It just gets discouraging. There are some bad apples in the barrel.

Scott Peck called them “People of the Lie.” That’s probably not too far from what Jesus meant when He said that Satan planted some people in good fields. They may look like God’s planting, but they are Satan’s instead.

It is especially tragic when they are church leaders. Wolves in shepherd’s clothing, as I’ve called them before. Blind guides. Whited sepulchers who are filled with dead men’s bones. Jesus’ words were stronger than mine.

The weed-patch stories are never far from my memory. The church I knew that had had seventeen pulpit preachers in twenty-one years. The one that fired Batsell Barrett Baxter. The elders that had preachers arrested on false charges. The character assassins that said, “We can’t tell you the whole truth in order to protect him. If you knew the whole story you would agree with our decision.” And on, and on, and on. Weed stuff. Toxic stuff. Devilish stuff.

I know some of you who receive this letter are in pain RIGHT NOW. You’ve done right but gotten punished for it. You should be praised, and instead you are being vilified. I hate such stuff. And I hear it a lot.

But to those who are victims of these sons of Satan, and those who abhor it all, there is a message in Jesus’ Matthew 13 story that must not be overlooked. The Lord Himself is the only One qualified to do the separating! And He will, in His own good time. I think we have to remember those things.

I think we also have to remember that this is not something new. It has been happening to prophets and priests for a long, long time. Our Lord felt it more than any of us have.

So, as Hebrews 10 says, we take it as a kind of discipline. Not punishment, but discipline. It makes us stronger. It makes us more dependent on the Lord. It puts us in a position where we can forgive, rather than seek revenge.

I Peter 4 speaks practically to these issues, as forcefully today as two thousand years ago. If you’re being persecuted, put this letter down and go read I Peter 4, right now.

Remember that God will do some separating. Remember that justice will ultimately prevail. And do not overlook your own sins while seeing the sins of others.

Because I do see so much pain, I often remind myself that there are far more healthy churches than unhealthy ones. There are for more good elders and preachers than bad ones. In God’s harvest, the wheat will ultimately be harvested and appreciated, and the weeds will fuel the oven. Righteousness will roll down from heaven and cover everything that is evil.

So let’s not stop planting, or maturing, or rejoicing. Let’s be faithful, even to the point of death.

After that comes resurrection.

Yours in Christ,
Silas Shotwell