



THE NEW SHOFAR

Our vocation is not to judge. Nor is it to figure out if someone deserves something. Our vocation is to lift the fallen, embrace our persecutors, restore the broken, heal the hurting.

July 23rd

What we sow in the world around us we will reap

Who does not like ridding our churches and our congregations of pesky tares? You know the ones. Those wicked and disgusting weeds growing up alongside of us, we the more respectable, gracious, good and wholesome wheat. They look like us but they are poisonous weeds and the only way to get rid of weeds is to, in all righteousness, pull them out and throw them onto the fire. They have no place in our beautiful, wholesome productive wheatfields.

Of course, this is not the kind of language used by Jesus when the Pharisees when they saw him mixing with tax collectors and sinners and attacked him (in righteousness). What he should have done is to follow our example and reject them, leave them to their own devices and focus attention on the good and the righteous. They disturb us. But that was not the way of Jesus – nor can it be our way if we are to wear the label of disciples of Christ.

The biblical tares are a species of rye-grass, the seeds of which are a strong poison. It bears the closest resemblance to wheat till the ear appears, and only then the difference is discovered. Even experts can be fooled into thinking tares are wheat and wheat are tares so care needs to be taken. Except, that is, when we are thinking of those “tares” in our church communities. We know *they* are not genuine wheat because...They are not like us. They do things differently, dance to a different tune and even, God forbid, end up putting people off. We all know their continuing presence in our midst is what is stopping us from growing, is forcing people to leave and are the reason why new people do not come. We have allowed the village idiots to make their home among us, to find a place in the Church family when all other families have sent them on their way. Better we rip out these “tares” for our own good.

What is the significance of Jesus eating with sinners?

But sinners sit at the core of Jesus’ mission. Remember the time Jesus violates one of the traditions of the Pharisees by healing a man on the Sabbath? The Pharisees muttered, *This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.* Jesus replies by suggesting they are the ones far from the Kingdom while the sinners have God’s loving attention. He throws no one out, rejects no one from his presence. He leaves that to the self-righteous.

Jesus’ mission was to seek and save the lost, but the Pharisees were blinded by their self-righteousness. How could God love and want us to love those who were antisocial, pains in the neck, sinners and all round miscreants? For Jesus it is clear: *It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*

Matthew records an even more pointed answer directed to those who want to rip up the tares and throw them out of the wheatfields of the Kingdom: *But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.* (Matthew 9:13). Jesus ate with sinners and welcomed them into his family of followers because they were the ones he was sent to save. That task is now handed on to us: to save, not to reject.

And then who can forget the most crushing of all criticisms of those who would like to reduce Christian fellowship to those who meet their own social and moral criteria: *Woe to*

you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

Jesus Demonstrates His Mission

Over and over again we see Jesus demonstrating mercy to those who do not deserve it, those whose behaviour might not show faith to the extent we would like but whose hearts are seeking the grace and mercy of God's messiah and saviour. We can so readily condemn the sins of others before confronting and resolving our own. Jesus' position is clear on this:

1. **A man with leprosy** dares to come to Jesus desiring to be healed but uncertain if Jesus is willing. Touching a leper was said to make a person unclean but Jesus was not only willing to heal him he did the unlawful thing of touching him while saying the words, "I am willing." God's mission is healing. God has a special place in the divine heart for all "lepers".

2. **The woman caught in the act of adultery** was dragged from a bed, thrown naked and alone in front of Jesus, while the crowd waited to throw rocks at her until she died. As the religious leaders demanded a response from Jesus, mercy, and truth came forth — the one without sin gets to throw the first rock. God's mission is forgiveness. Not judgment.

3. **A certain tax collector named Zacchaeus** heard Jesus was coming to his town and ran to see him. Being short he needed to climb a tree. Jesus took note of him up in that tree, saw that his heart had run to him, and called out to Zacchaeus to have dinner with him. As Jesus eats with this sinner, Zacchaeus stands up and says: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." God's mission is salvation and that is the mission we share. Rather than reject the one we see as the problem, in Jesus our task is to nurture them that they may open themselves to the saving and transforming love of God. They are sent to us from God.

4. **The Samaritan woman** at the well. How many strikes did she religiously have against her? She was a woman, who had multiple husbands, was living with a man but not married, and she was a Samaritan (a people the Israelites despised). Even Jesus' disciples were surprised with him ministering to her. Jesus was able to reach not only her but the entire area. God's mission is for all. At what point does Jesus give up on someone and pull them out of the church and throw them into the fire? No such point existed for him. Neither should it exist in our own faith communities today. The patience God has for us is precisely the same patience and enduring compassion we need to have for others. All others.

The Significance of *Whosoever*

There's a reason the most quoted verse in the Bible is John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whosoever** believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* **Whosoever** is the Christian man or woman of faith who will struggle with their sinfulness and their problematic behaviour. They more than likely know they are far from perfect and even see the consequences of their words and deeds. They probably struggle more than we are willing to admit and annoy us, offend us and antagonise us more than we believe they should. They persevere in faith in Jesus Christ even while they continue to "sin" and so easily become hypocrites in our eyes. We are not willing to forgive them or to forget their offenses against us. We see the only way for our church family to continue is for them to be treated like the tares they are – rip them up and throw them out. That is best for all of us.

As always, the problem is Jesus!

Before we seek to remove someone from our midst, or push them to the boundaries and shun them we should remember this quote from Paul: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21).* In Jesus, our vocation remains the loving of the “tares” in our midst so that they may become God’s righteousness. Throwing them out is what Satan wants. Embracing them in healing love is what Jesus demands of us. This will include personal pain, but we are responsible for them.