IGNORING JESUS’ PRINCIPLES

Roman Emperor Constantine (A.D. 306–337) worked diligently to unite his citizens under one state and one religion, but under Emperor Justinian (A.D. 527–565), the church and state became so interconnected that it’s difficult to distinguish between the two. Justinian relentlessly suppressed every voice that disagreed with Catholicism and deprived every dissenter of basic rights. He required his citizens to abandon all previously held religious beliefs, be baptized, and attend church with their families. The law was displayed in all provincial cities, and all had to observe Sunday as God’s holy day. Those who refused to conform were forced to flee the empire or face severe repercussions.

Christians who were deemed heretics experienced the most relentless persecution under Justinian, whose legal code defined heresy as “all thought and worship contrary to the Catholic and apostolic Church and the orthodox faith.” Church facilities belonging to dissenting congregations were seized and destroyed. Merchants were forbidden from transacting with heretics. All heretics’ goods were subject to seizure at any time. People caught teaching heresy were put to death, and anyone who offered such people refuge shared their punishment. Governors who failed to enforce these laws were heavily fined and removed from office.

Many probably believe such extreme religious intolerance is unlikely to recur in today’s world, but prophecy indicates that certain events in this history will repeat. This week’s lesson explores what Jesus taught about when it is and isn’t appropriate to practice religious intolerance against dissenters.
Write out Matthew 13:24–43 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 24–30. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
The parable of the wheat and tares was given to restrain the disciples’ impulse to forcefully correct unfaithful people, effectively prohibiting the church from using violence against heretics. Jesus began many of His parables by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like...,” as if He was desperate to communicate something completely foreign to His audience. He was searching for any possible way to give them even a small glimpse of the revolutionary principles from above.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24–29), Jesus once again painted a picture of what the kingdom of heaven is all about by contrasting the way God thinks and the way people think. The landowner illustrates the way God thinks. The way we think is represented by the servants, who were puzzled as to why the landowner would not respond to the crisis with immediate force. Shouldn’t the noxious weeds in the field be quickly pulled up and destroyed? They offered to immediately pull the weeds themselves, but the landowner perceived the unnecessary damage the wheat would endure if this were done prematurely and by the wrong hands. The servants were confused on two fronts: the proper timing and the proper agents. The landowner showed tender care and patience toward his crop, waiting for the grain to mature before the time of harvest.

Jesus clearly identified the time and people group represented in this parable. The good seed symbolizes the people God has saved while the weeds depict the wicked who will be destroyed (v. 38). Verse 39 spells out the rest: “the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.” The timing of this harvest is crucial. All are commanded to keep their hands off the tares until the final judgment. Anyone who attempts to use force and intimidation to clean up God’s church before His decided time directly violates the God’s explicit instructions. Those who take it upon themselves to separate the heretics from the faithful themselves wicked and disobedient servants, presume to do the work God has strictly delegated to angels (v. 41), and appropriate God’s authority.

Jesus gave this parable to His disciples early in their ministry to serve as a template for their future work. He identified certain methods of responding to problems that were permanently and absolutely off limits. This parable showed the disciples why they needed to trust God’s ability to resolve problems. Jesus taught them to restrain themselves and leave judgment for God to handle. If this one parable had been remembered and followed, it would have helped save the professed Christian church from descending into the ugly centuries of religious tyranny. This parable speaks directly to modern believers as well, inviting us to put our trust and confidence in God’s ability to be the final judge.
WHAT ABOUT CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

The parable of the wheat and the tares doesn’t mean the church cannot disfellowship members who have chosen open sin or renounced aspects of the faith. In fact, Jesus provided clear steps for the church to follow when a member has stubbornly chosen to continue down their path of sin (Matt. 18:15–20). Such people are not to be punished with any instrument of cruelty, for the severest measure against an unrepentant member is to disconnect them from the community of believers. Christ said, “If he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). In looking at Jesus’ ministry to see how He related to heathens and tax collectors, we find that He was always seeking to win them over. He drew those who were teachable and ready to change into His inner circle. One thing is abundantly clear: Jesus never punished even the most degenerate heathens and tax collectors with fines, imprisonment, torture, or death. He never used coercion of any kind to grow and shape His church. The guidelines for church discipline in Matthew 18 therefore match the guidelines Jesus established in the parable of the wheat and the tares. The goal in every step of church discipline is always restoration and reconciliation. 1 Corinthians 5 provides a great example of how to apply these principles in difficult situations within the church. In this rather shocking instance, the church member in question was engaged in a sexual relationship with his stepmother and showed no signs of remorse. Paul gave instructions for this person to be decisively removed from the church’s fellowship (vv. 1–8). He urged the remaining members to no longer keep company with sexually immoral believers, though he made sure they understood that he didn’t mean they shouldn’t socialize with sexually immoral people of the world (vv. 9–11). Later, when this man repented of his ways, Paul encouraged the church to welcome him back into fellowship (2 Cor. 2:6–8). We know from this story and Jesus’ instructions that a responsible church will occasionally have to disfellowship people.

Some people think having religious liberty means a member can believe any false doctrine and still be a member of the church. This is a terrible distortion. In reality, religious liberty grants a person the autonomy to believe whatever they want and join a likeminded organization—as long as it doesn’t put others in danger. Religious liberty is not grounds to force an organization to work with people who do not align with their doctrinal teachings. Paul supported this idea, counseling some church leaders to “avoid” those who were teaching contrary doctrine (Rom. 16:17) and instructing others to stop the mouths of such false teachers (Titus 1:11). Paul didn’t mean they should call the police to prevent these false teachers from sharing their ideas in other venues; he simply warned the leaders not to give these speakers a platform in their own churches. If they wanted to spread their false ideas, they needed to go elsewhere, not hijack the church platform. Such counsel is pertinent to the church still today.
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What relationship do the following verses have with Matthew 13:24–43?

Matthew 10:14–16
Matthew 18:15–20
Matthew 23:37, 38
Matthew 7:12
Luke 22:49–53
John 18:36
Romans 12:17–21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

Review your memorized verse from Matthew 13:24–43.
FORCE VERSUS LOVE

It should be expected that a true follower of Christ would fight with the same weapons He used. The founders of other popular world religions conquered lands, fought with swords, and passed great wealth to their disciples, but Jesus never fought on an earthly battlefield, never sat on an earthly throne, and passed no earthly wealth to His followers. He rejected weapons of intimidation, force, and violence. His mission could only be accomplished with love, goodness, and simple persuasion. From beginning to end, Jesus placed an extremely high value on human dignity and free will. There is no greater evidence that a professed disciple of Christ has denied their Lord to serve another master than if they abandon His methods of love and resort to using force. Using cruelty in Christ’s name is arguably the ultimate self-deception. Jesus warned of this astounding delusion when He said, “The time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 16:2). Jesus predicted man’s most egregious abuses of religion.

Jesus upheld religious liberty because He had a perfect understanding of human nature and free will. When He said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28), He made it clear that personal choice is the only thing that can decide a person’s destiny. He knew that force can never change a person’s innermost beliefs—we cannot be forced to sin or to stop sinning. We can only be saved or lost according to whether or not we choose to cooperate with God. Dissenters cannot be corrected with force, and Christ has declared this method entirely off limits in His kingdom.

Without respect for free will, human beings become both the receivers and the enactors of subjugation and cruelty. Jesus came to restore the image of God in man, and God has free will. Humanity therefore cannot reflect His image unless free will is protected and honored. All who join Christ’s mission to restore God’s image in humanity will work to protect human free will.

If every person followed the golden rule, “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12), the world would be relieved of religious liberty problems. Leaders from dominant religions would put themselves in the place of minority religions and treat them well—the way they would want to be treated if the roles were reversed. There would be a bond of sympathy and brotherhood between people of various religious traditions—even between the ones who disagree the most. Christians in particular should obey Jesus’ guidance and treat other religions with kindness and respect—again, the way they would want to be treated if they belonged to that religion. Especially in places where Christianity is the dominant worldview, Christians should be careful not to trample the rights of other religions. No matter how small the group of believers, we should always give other religions the same protection we desire for Christians living in Muslim or Hindu nations.
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Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week's study of the chapter, what are some personal applications you are convicted of in your life?

What are some practical applications you must make in your school, family, workplace, and church life?

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

“Notwithstanding Christ's warning, men have sought to uproot the tares. To punish those who were supposed to be evildoers, the church has had recourse to the civil power. Those who differed from the established doctrines have been imprisoned, put to torture and to death, at the instigation of men who claimed to be acting under the sanction of Christ. But it is the spirit of Satan, not the Spirit of Christ, that inspires such acts. This is Satan's own method of bringing the world under his dominion. God has been misrepresented through the church by this way of dealing with those supposed to be heretics.” (Ellen White, Christ's Object Lessons [1900], 74.)

“Christ has plainly taught that those who persist in open sin must be separated from the church, but He has not committed to us the work of judging character and motive. He knows our nature too well to entrust this work to us. Should we try to uproot from the church those whom we suppose to be spurious Christians, we should be sure to make mistakes. Often we regard as hopeless subjects the very ones whom Christ is drawing to Himself. Were we to deal with these souls according to our imperfect judgment, it would perhaps extinguish their last hope. Many who think themselves Christians will at last be found wanting. Many will be in heaven who their neighbors supposed would never enter there. Man judges from appearance, but God judges the heart. The tares and the wheat are to grow together until the harvest; and the harvest is the end of probationary time.” (Ibid., 71, 72.)

“It was the policy of Rome to obliterate every trace of dissent from her doctrines or decrees. Everything heretical, whether persons or writings, she sought to destroy. Expressions of doubt, or questions as to the authority of papal dogmas, were enough to forfeit the life of rich or poor, high or low. Rome endeavored also to destroy every record of her cruelty toward dissenters. Papal councils decreed that books and writings containing such records should be committed to the flames. Before the invention of printing, books were few in number, and in a form not favorable for preservation; therefore there was little to prevent the Romanists from carrying out their purpose.” (Ellen White, The Great Controversy [1911], 61, 62.)

“Our first parents, though created innocent and holy, were not placed beyond the possibility of wrongdoing. God made them free moral agents, capable of appreciating the wisdom and benevolence of His character and the justice of His requirements, and with full liberty to yield or to withhold obedience.” (Ellen White, Patriarchs and Prophets [1890], 48.)

“It is not God's purpose to coerce the will. Man was created a free moral agent. Like the inhabitants of all other worlds, he must be subjected to the test of obedience; but he is never brought into such a position that yielding to evil becomes a matter of necessity. No temptation or trial is permitted to come to him which he is unable to resist. God made such ample provision that man need never have been defeated in the conflict with Satan.” (Ibid., 331, 332.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What have you learned from this week’s lesson that can help you tolerate others whose beliefs differ from yours?

What are some examples of Jesus respecting free will?

How did Jesus make such a large impact without using force?

How can we heal the church’s reputation after all the abuses Christians of the past have committed?

Why does the New Testament provide a protocol for disfellowshipping someone? When should these steps be followed?

Do you think your local church is applying discipline fairly to all members?

How can the church be more successful with winning people who have been disfellowshipped back?

What kind of thinking starts a person down the path of believing they’re doing God’s will when they kill people (John 16:2)?