

“The Parable of the Weeds”
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
January 10, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Our task during these weeks has been to understand what the Bible teaches about the mission of the Church. The piece of that task we want to tackle today is to attempt to understand the nature of our current age, the period of time between the two comings of Jesus, and the impact this has on the Church’s mission. We want to do what all of our children and now some of our grandchildren have done with the small world globe that has been sitting on our kitchen table for several decades. Their first question is always to ask what this is, quickly followed by asking what part of the globe we live on. They have a natural curiosity to know both the big picture and to locate themselves within this big picture.

The parable of the weeds helps us locate ourselves in this era between Jesus’ comings and the corresponding responsibility given to the Church during this age. The parable is about a wealthy and powerful landowner who had an enemy determined to harm the landowner. He devised a plot that reminds me of some modern day sabotage effort involving a computer virus designed to bring damage to its target. The enemy in the parable does his damage through sowing weeds in the fields where the owner had planted good seed. He came by night to do so, because he lacked the power to come against his enemy in a more open way. He came and went undetected until the seeds germinated and then grew enough to distinguish the good seed from the bad. The servants of the landowner wanted to go and rip out the weeds, but the landowner wouldn’t allow it. He reasoned that such an action would inevitably bring harm to the good wheat. It would be better, he said, to let both grow to maturity. It would then be an easy thing to tell the difference, and the wheat could be separated from the tares and each dealt with appropriately, storing the wheat in the barn and burning the weeds for fuel.

It is not a difficult thing to interpret this parable, because Jesus explains it in response to a request from his disciples. The landowner who sows the good seed is Jesus. The enemy who devises a scheme to bring harm is the devil. The good seed refers to the sons of God, while the bad seed to the children of the devil. The field is the world itself, the harvest is the final judgment and the reapers are angels. Three questions emerge in the parable and beg for an answer. Let’s consider them now.

I. How Can This Be?

This is the first question the servants in the parable ask. When the weeds appear, they ask the master, **“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?”** (v. 27). This is a theological question that many people today have of God. It is known as the problem of evil. The problem is often stated like this: in light of the existence of evil, God cannot be both good and all-powerful. Since evil exists, then God might be good and simply unable to stop it. Or, on the other hand, he might be able to end it but refuses to do so, in which case he is not good. But, this argument goes, he cannot be both good and all-powerful. Today’s parable adds a third element that delivers us from this dilemma. It’s the element of time. God is both good and powerful, and at the appropriate time he will deal with evil. But he has a good reason for not doing so immediately. Using the imagery of the parable, Jesus says that God waits because of his concern for the good seed, the wheat. He tells the servants not to pull up the weeds, lest in doing so they should inadvertently damage the wheat. Rather, the weeds will be dealt with at the appropriate time, when it’s time for the harvest and they would be pulled up anyway. Let all be taken at that time and separated and dealt with in accordance with their true nature. The wheat will be stored into the master’s barn and the weeds burned for fuel.

The parable reveals two concerns on the heart of God. First, God is concerned with his world. The enemy attacks what is precious to the master when he sows these weeds. He wants to bring harm to something the master values in order to bring hurt to the master. Have you ever known someone who loves to garden? They delight in an orderly, well-kept and weed-free garden. To harm the object of their delight is to harm that person. God loves his world, and Satan introduces evil into it because he hates God and hates what God loves. We see God’s concern for the world too in the servants’ incredulity. They ask how their master’s field could have such weeds. The presence of evil in this world breaks the heart of God. But God is willing to endure a broken heart because of something else he values.

God has even greater concern for the wheat, the good seed. This good seed, remember, refers to the “sons of the kingdom” (v. 38), and God is willing to endure the suffering of a cluttered field, of a world far from his heart’s desire for it, out of his concern for his children. How might God’s people be harmed by rooting out evil before the day of judgment? The assumption behind this parable is that God is at work turning weeds into good seed. We all start out life as weeds, and by God’s power and grace we can be transformed by faith into wheat. But if the servants come before the appointed time, they could rip out a weed before it can be turned into wheat. In other words, this is the era when transformation can occur. When this era closes down, the opportunity for such transformation will cease. There was a time years ago when I was a weed. Had God allowed the burning judgment of weeds then, I would have been burned up.

This parable provides us with a very helpful perspective about our current age, a perspective summarized by theologians as “inaugurated eschatology.” Let me explain that phrase. The word “eschatology” refers to last things. How will it

all end? The Bible says that it will all end with God's complete reign of peace and joy. Every knee will bow before King Jesus and the reign of King Jesus will be fully embraced. The curse will be forever removed from the earth, and with it all the horrendous results of sin will be locked away for good. The first word of the phrase, "inaugurated," means that this reign of Jesus has already begun. An equivalent but simpler phrase than inaugurated eschatology would be the "already-not yet" nature of the kingdom. The kingdom is here already, but not yet here in full. God's people are new creations, but we still battle mightily with a sin nature. The good seed is present in God's field now, but so is the bad seed. Good and evil are both present. Our next question deals with the ethical implications of this reality.

II. What Should We Do?

The servants of the master feel the need to do something, and they bring a proposal to the master. **"Do you want us to go and gather them [the weeds]?"** This is our instinct with regard to evil, isn't it? We want to root it out and destroy it. It is an understandable instinct, and at the appropriate time, this is exactly what will be done with evil. But Jesus clearly says here that in this age we are not to take this approach for the simple reason that we are unable to do so without bringing about unintentional harm. Rather, we are to accept the fact that evil will be with us in this interim age.

Does the acceptance of the inevitable presence of evil in this age mean that we should stop trying to reverse evil? Not at all. We are commanded to do good to all, and bringing good to others requires that we address the primary thing bringing harm to people—evil. But in our efforts to do so, we must accept the fact that only Jesus will be able to end it for good. A good illustration of this can be seen in what the Bible says about addressing poverty. The Bible is very clear in its command that we do what we can to alleviate poverty and its damaging effects on people. **"Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed"** (Prov. 19:17). Yet Jesus also taught, **"You always have the poor with you"** (Matt. 26:11).

So if we should accept the fact that evil will not be completely removed until Jesus' return, what advance of God's kingdom should we expect to see in this present age? We should expect to see weeds turned into wheat by the powerful work of God through his gospel. God is at work today ridding his field of evil, and he does so by this miracle of rebirth. This is the mission of the Church today. It leads to an important application. We should write off no one as being too evil to become a follower of Christ. God has been at work for centuries turning weeds into wheat, and we are privileged to partner with him in this work.

My wife is an example of this. Though she was not a believer in high school, she was invited to a church youth group which she began attending. She says

now that she was a flirt and a bad influence on others, and many parents would not allow their daughters to be with her. But one couple there did not write her off. They befriended her, gave her rides to and from youth group, and invited her into their home and lives. She looked to many like a weed in God's field, but she has turned out to be a fruitful stalk of wheat, bearing much fruit herself. And this was in part due to the fact that someone early in her life didn't write her off.

Let me give another example. I've been reading a biography of Jack Miller, founder of the mission agency Serge. He would often welcome into his home people who were far from the Lord, in hopes that such a show of hospitality would be used to bring them to faith in Christ. Gwen was a woman Jack and his wife invited to live with them. She had been deeply involved in the occult, drugs and motorcycle gangs when she arrived in 1974. The darkness grew inside of her in her first weeks with them, and she began planning to murder her host family. Jack's biographer continues as follows:

As the gospel touched her life, however, she was overcome with guilt. Jack was surprised...when she blurted out, "I've been planning to kill you and Mrs. Miller!" As he recovered from the shock, he told her, "Gwen, before anything else happens, I want you to know I forgive you. I forgive you for planning to murder us." Gwen was now the one who was stunned into silence. Soon she began to weep. "You are the only people who have ever loved me, and I have been wanting to kill you! I am sick!" She took the gospel to heart, surrendered to Christ, and experienced a marked change in her life over the following months. (Michael Graham, p. 84)

By God's grace, weeds can be turned into wheat. That is the great work of God in this age, and it is the mission he has given to us. God is telling us in this parable that he will take care of all the bad stuff in this world, and he will do so at Judgment Day. Our job is to concentrate on being faithful to the good news that weeds can be converted to wheat. This leads to our final question.

III. Am I Weed or Wheat?

This parable teaches that the dominant event that will close out this age and usher in the next is Judgment Day. The Bible is clear, both in this parable and elsewhere, in teaching that it will be a day of separation. The weeds and the wheat will be separated, with the wheat being gathered into the barn and the weeds burned. As Jesus says, **"Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (v. 40-42). The wheat, on the other hand, will enjoy quite a different outcome. **"Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father"** (v. 43).

This brings up the very important question of determining which group one belongs to. Our parable provides us with some help here. The difference between wheat and weeds is fruit-bearing. When the weeds are young and just beginning to grow, it can be difficult to distinguish them from true wheat. But when they are mature, there is no difficulty at all in knowing. All you have to do is notice whether or not fruit is present.

The same is true of us. The good seed bears fruit. Let me mention two such fruits. The first is a love for others. This helps answer the question brought up by this parable concerning our motivation for doing good in light of Jesus' teaching about what we should expect in this current age. If Jesus has said that we should expect evil to continue until his return, then why seek to work for positive change? The answer is love for others, which is a fruit of the Spirit. We may not be able to rid the world permanently of those things which cause poverty, but we can love those trapped in poverty and do what we can to help them. God clearly calls us to do so. And while we're helping them in their poverty, we can trust the Spirit for the courage to tell them of the ultimate riches found in Christ.

This brings up one more fruit, the fruit of trusting our King. Jesus says that this world will continue to be plagued by evil until he returns. Can you trust him with this? Can you trust his wisdom even when you are touched and harmed by such evil? To be a citizen of the kingdom is to be rightly related to the King, and the heart of such a right relationship is to trust him fully.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with one more illustration of loving others in an evil world by helping weeds to become wheat. This one also comes again from Jack Miller's biography. One day Jack and his wife picked up a hitchhiking teenager and proceeded to talk with him about the gospel for the next half hour. This young man was a drug addict and thought that the Millers had such peace in their lives because they were high on drugs. A few weeks later, Jack had noticed a motorcycle gang that often gathered at a fast-food parking lot in his community. One day he approached this gang and said, "Hi, I'm Reverend Miller, and I'm looking for the Pagan's Motorcycle Gang. Do you know where I can find them?" He then attempted to tell them about Jesus, but most were high and interrupted him with jeers, foul language and threats. One of the young men started screaming at him and was about to strike him when another of the young men stopped him. When Jack spoke to the young man who had intervened on his behalf, the young man identified himself as the hitchhiker Jack had previously picked up. To make a long story short, this young man, named Bob Heppe, ended up trusting Christ, marrying Jack's daughter and becoming a field director for Serge. He is now the field director under whom our own Jeremy Martin serves. Weeds can indeed become wheat, by the power and grace of God.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

1. Have you known people whose faith has been harmed after an experience of suffering or evil? Can you describe the suffering or evil that led to this?
2. This is the problem of evil. In brief, we can state the problem like this. Because of the presence of evil, God cannot be both good and all-powerful. He can be one or the other, but not both. How does this parable help us to answer this problem? [If you're having trouble with this, refer to the sermon manuscript on the church website.]
3. One of the themes of the Bible behind this parable is this idea of "inaugurated eschatology," that the kingdom of God is both already here and not yet here at the same time. For example, in this parable, God has his good seed (the kingdom is already here), but also chooses to allow evil to continue (the bad seed is not immediately removed). Can you think of other example of the "already-not yet" character of the kingdom?
4. The servants instinctively want to rip up the weeds. This too is our instinct when it comes to evil. Why does Jesus say here that this is not a good idea?
5. If evil is to continue in this world until Judgment Day, what should be our motivation for seeking to counter evil wherever we might find it? In other words, what prevents us from passivity regarding evil?
6. What positive effects might there be in our lives if we learn both to hate evil but also be patient with it, awaiting God's timing for its removal?
7. Is there some group of people that you have written off as being beyond God's ability to save?
8. Several examples of weeds becoming wheat were mentioned in the sermon. Can you think of any others? Please describe them.