

What to Do with the Weeds?

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

The *Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds*, popularly known as the *Wheat and the Tares*, is a story of judgment. Judgment is a loaded word which evokes strong emotions. Once the words judge and judgment were seen as a central part of our faith. Jesus *will come again to judge the living and dead*, and a sense of a final day of judgment were more commonly preached and believed. In my lifetime these words have taken on an extremely negative association. When challenged or criticized many Christians might

angrily reply, "Don't you dare judge me!" The Bible verse Matthew 7:1 was frequently quoted where Jesus said, *Judge not, lest ye be judged*. New words came into our vocabulary as people were accused of being *judgmental* and embracing in *judgmentalism*. Judging was a just plain bad thing to do, and even God was discouraged from judging!

Is judging a bad thing? A good thing? We should not be quick to judge others, and Jesus did warn that the standards by which we judge others will be held against us. Yet having said all this, we do want to be people of sound judgment. We want our mates to be people of good judgment. One wouldn't want to send their spouse to the car dealership with thousands of dollars only to learn hours later that they had spent all that money instead on magic beans. The *Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds* addresses the matter of judgment from multiple angles. It is a subtle and unsettling story, and challenging enough that I do not believe I have ever preached on it before. Yet to those who dare to draw near, it is a word of wisdom and peace.

It begins as a parable of *suspended* judgment. Jesus tells us of a farmer who planted a field of wheat and then came under attack. *He put before them another parable: The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.* Jesus is staying with the imagery of the Good News of the Kingdom of God being like a seed, and the soil being our hearts where that Gospel message comes alive. The stalks of wheat are believers. God had a wholesome plan, but an enemy did a terrible thing by planting weeds in that field. *And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'* This was no minor prank! It was an assault on a farmer's livelihood and such a deed was punishable by Roman law. Such a vile act would seem to necessitate a harsh response! Or would it?

When one hears of weeds, like it or not, the first response is to go and pull the weeds, and this was the suggestion of the slaves who worked the fields. The master, however, had a different idea. *But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.'* Not only did the master show restraint but he also spoke with a cool objectivity about the situation. An enemy, the devil, had done this, and the master was not rattled. He had a response. *Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.* The wheat and weeds will be separated at the harvest, and for good reason. To try to pull the weeds would do much damage to the good wheat. We have all had the experience of trying to pull weeds that have worked themselves in among our desired plant. Weeds are often miserably difficult to pull, and at times it does not seem worth the damage that is done to a crop.

It has also been pointed out that the weeds referred to in this parable, also known as tares, were the darnel plant which looked very much like good wheat and it was only at full maturity that the darnel could be definitively recognized. (Tare was the term used for a wide variety of weeds and ground cover in that time.) The master knew that an attack on these weeds would cause many good plants to be destroyed, and many weeds be overlooked. "Let them grow until harvest" was the farmer's command.

This parable speaks of a world full of believers with the Good News and God's Spirit alive and active in their hearts. It also tells of non-believers and those who have been blinded by the enemy. We share the same planet, and one can even argue that the Church has many in its ranks that are not true believers. Should the Church be "purified" and neighborhoods segregated so that God's people can dwell together in peace? The master warns against judging and separating out the supposedly good from the supposedly bad. Let us be careful how we judge! Paul echoes Jesus' sentiment in his First Corinthian letter: *Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.* (1 Cor.4:5)

"Matthew 7:1ers" love this parable for it seems to speak of not judging, but their great delight in the story often misses out on the bigger picture. Let us consider the rest of the parable. Read in its entirety this story tells of a judgment that will indeed come. Evil *will* be punished. In the parable itself this judgment is mentioned, but very quietly. *Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.* The master speaks in a rather matter of fact manner, but in the later interpretation which Jesus offers to the disciples it receives much more attention and emotion. *The weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* The punishment of the nonbelievers is expressed quite artfully making the parable more than a bit scary.

Next Jesus tells of the righteous, finally free of the challenge and assault of the unrighteous, and how they shall radiate holiness and joy. *Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!* The day will be theirs! This is actually a familiar hope as we regularly express with the Apostles' Creed: *from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.* It shall be a day of

justice. Today we hear many cries for justice, and inequities in our legal and economic system need to be reconsidered. Humans will keep on trying to engineer a fair and just society, but it will only truly come when the Lord returns, and that shall be a wonderful day.

The *Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds* presents a strange tension. Rather than present a single lesson it asks us to hold two truths in tension. We are *not* to be quick to judge others. God is a gracious God and that grace should shine through our lives. And yet, a day of judgment *will* come, and we are to seek justice. This is a sobering message. These two truths must both be embraced at the same time, but our urge is to cling only to one or the other truth. This is why this parable is so difficult for us to grasp and accept.

This is a lesson on living in the meantime. First, we are to be cautious and careful in making judgments. Let us be clear that life is full of judgments to be made. Just a few chapters later in Matthew 18, Jesus spoke of judging misbehavior in the Church and of disciplining bad actors. As a community and as a Church family we are not to be overly permissive. We should be slow to criticize when we see something which is wrong, and should do so in a way which will not create undue hurt feelings. We must always be ready to encourage and praise for that is how God's family is built up.

As we live before the harvest this should also be a season of persuasion. Let us presume that every stalk around us is a stalk of good grain just ready to mature. Let us present Christ, as graciously and lovingly as we can. Let us make a fair and reasonable explanation of our faith. Let us try to persuade the world! Sadly, there is too little attempt being made these days to persuade. People with beliefs to advance are increasingly quick to form a political movement and see that their beliefs become the law of the land! We find political movements eager to shame those who do not fully embrace their beliefs. Jesus was always gracious and persuasive, and challenged people to think. He invited honest dialogue. We should do likewise.

Finally, this parable reminds us that we live in a time to trust God. Are there nonbelievers and difficult, threatening people around us? Let us not be upset, for Jesus told us this would happen. Let us be about lives of encouragement which hope in a coming day of harvest. Let us keep on growing in faith and helping those around us do likewise.

At the heart of the story is an unnerving attack. *But while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.* The master seemed at peace with it all. He was unshaken. In these unsettled times, let us hear this story, and let us borrow a little of the Master's peace.