

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Turn to Matthew 13.

The Question. Has the kingdom of God really begun in this world? Evil and evil people seem to be carrying on just fine. We ourselves have plenty of struggles with sin. If the kingdom of God has begun at all, it may seem to us a feeble effort.

Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the weeds to help us sort out this kind of wondering. He knew very well that in some ways it would seem that God's work on earth had faltered. Lots of opposition to the kingdom of God, or at least complete disinterest. How is this God's kingdom?

Jesus teaches in this parable that the kingdom of God on earth has two clear stages, and we are in the first stage. In the first stage, life now, good and bad are mixed together, both live and grow.

At the end of the first stage there will be a separation, a cleansing. Evil will be taken away and punished, and according Jesus' words, *the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*. That will be the second stage of the kingdom of God.

Jesus told the parable of the wheat and the weeds, and then he told another parable, and then the disciples brought Jesus back to the wheat and the weeds, for an explanation. So first we'll look at the parable Jesus gave, and then we'll look at his explanation.

The Parable – Matt 13:24-30) *Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' ²⁸ "An enemy did this," he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' ²⁹ "No," he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"*

Farming Methods and Pseudo-Stories – The story as Jesus told it makes sense, even years later with different farming methods. Supposing an enemy seeded weeds in a grain field. Would the farmer have pulled them out right away, as his servants suggested? Or would he wait to the end, as this farmer did? We do not know.

It does not matter a lot. Parables do not need to correspond to reality at every detail. Parables are pseudo-stories in a sense. They need to have enough reality in them for people to understand what happens, but do not always describe reality as it is or should be. They teach a lesson.

The Important Conversation: When to Separate - Planting wheat, and then planting weeds, and then both sprouting and taking shape, that all happens in the first third of the parable. The last half of the paragraph is the conversation about when to separate the weeds from the wheat.

And I will say that again: the last half of the parable is when to separate the weeds from the wheat. The servants seem to think these should be separated right away, but the master does not want that. The master says, “No, wait, the harvesters will separate bad from good at harvest.”

And the reason is this: it is better for the good plants. If you separate now, the good plants might be uprooted. The master does not want to spoil any good plants. So wait until harvest.

Jesus Explains the Wheat and the Weeds, Part 1 (Matt 13:36-39) Jesus explains the parable in two sections, we’ll look at them one at a time.

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” ³⁷ He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

Analogy and Allegory Parables can be either analogies or allegories. An analogy is just a story with a lesson, a story that teaches something. The parable of the Good Samaritan is an analogy, Jesus used it to teach what it means to love our neighbour. The different people or places do not stand for anything in the real world. It is an analogy.

An allegory is an analogy with something more. An allegory has a lesson, it teaches something, like the analogy, but in an allegory there is more: different people or things in the parable stand for, or represent, specific things or people in the real world.

Wheat and Weeds is clearly an allegory: *The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.*

Different people or things in the parable stand for specific things or people in the real world. The basic rule for deciding if a parable is an allegory or not is that a parable is only an analogy, not unless something in the context tells us it represents specific characters in the real world.

Wheat and Weeds Representations - (13:37-39) *He answered, (1) “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. (2) ³⁸ The field is the world, (3) and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. (4) The weeds are the people of the evil one, (5) ³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. (6) The harvest is the end of the age, and (7) the harvesters are angels.*

In the earlier parable, the Sower and the Seed, the seed was the message of the kingdom, the seed was the gospel. Here it is different, here the seed is people themselves, and we have two different kinds of people.

The field is the world. The parable of the wheat and the weeds often gets used to explain good and bad in the church. But Jesus is clear. The field is not the church, the field is the world. It is not complicated, and there is no reason to take other than as Jesus said it.

God's people are in the world, and the evil one's people are in the world, all living and acting like themselves, together. Jesus did not picture the church being this kind of mix of good people and bad people.

We are not used to explaining good and bad people with such spiritual language. It does not happen outside or inside the church. The people of the kingdom, the people of the evil one. The Son of Man puts one kind in the world, and the devil puts the other kind in the world.

We explain people by their personal past, or by their own mind or choices. Jesus explained people by their spiritual loyalties, their spiritual origins and attachments.

Notice that the servants in the parable disappear entirely in the allegorical explanation. Who are the servants? They are not anyone, they were only in the story to help the story move along.

Jesus Explains the Wheat and the Weeds, Part 2 (Matt 13:40-43)

⁴⁰ "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

The first thing to notice here is that this whole section describes the end of the age, eschatological judgment. In his explanation, Jesus ignores the conversation about when to separate, immediately or at harvest time.

What Jesus wants to make clear to us is that **there will be a separation**. The world will not always be as it is, the kingdom people and the evil one's people living and producing their own fruit side by side. That's now, but that's only the first stage.

That is the emphasis of the story. Remember that this explanation is for the disciples, it is for insiders, for us, the people of the kingdom. The Lord wants Us to know that there will be a great dividing between people.

The sequence: the people who do evil are the first ones the angels take away.

This does not fit with the “rapture” theology that is so strong in some circles, but Jesus is clear about the order, both in the parable and the explanation: evil people are taken first.

A few weeks ago, in Advent, we read in Matthew 24 that in Noah’s day, the flood came and took all those people away. Two men working, one taken and one left, two women working, one left.

By this wheat and weeds parable, and by the flood story, the wicked people are taken first. In this story, the order is important: at the End of the age, first the wicked are weeded out and sent to severe judgement.

And then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father! Is that not a bright and hopeful line?

Faith and Works in the Gospels In this parable, people are divided into the people of the kingdom who are righteous, and the people of the evil one who are wicked. The difference is actions not faith. This is normal in the Gospels, which speak of works much more than faith.

In the parable of the unjust steward, Jesus clearly taught that we would be received into God’s heavenly dwelling because we made friends with him by our use of unrighteous mammon.

The whole Bible always assumes that faith and obedience are different sides of the same coin. We have found sentences in Paul that say we are saved by our faith not our obedience. This is true, no one earns or deserves to be a child of God, it is a gift of his grace.

But sometimes ride those texts of Paul too hard. Even in those very same letters of Paul, it’s clear that if a person’s faith does not shape their life, they do not have real faith. If they live just like the world, they don’t belong in the church. Faith and a changed life go together.

The problem is that Christians are can be too anxious and concerned about their failures, the parts of our life where we still struggle often. We are not nearly enough concerned to thank God for the way his Spirit has shaped us and changed us.

If we are showing obedience to Christ in three parts of our life, and struggle with one part, we should be thanking and praising God for his help in changing us three times as much as we despair about the fourth part. But we do not.

We believe the accuser, so we despair three times as much about the one part as we give thanks for the three parts. As James says, “My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be.”

In the Gospels, and all the Bible, faith and obedience are joined, two parts of one package. In the Gospels, the disciples fail often, and Jesus teaches that the righteous need to ask forgiveness every day, and Jesus does not seem upset about that.

You make sure you praise God *just as much* for each part of your life that he has kindly changed, as you ask his help for each part that needs strengthening.

The Surprise Something gets thrown into the fire that was not mentioned at all until near this second part of the explanation. Did anyone catch it? “Everything that causes sin.”

In the parable, the people the enemy plants, and they are separated at burned at the End. But Jesus sneaks in something else, in v41: *The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.*

Things around us cause us to sin, and sometimes these things are inside our very minds and souls. Remember that Jesus has been tempted, too, and severely. Evil people are not the only problem God’s people have in the world. Things pull us into sin.

In Greek the word is actually “stumbling” – all causes of stumbling will be collected, and they will be thrown in the fire, too. I felt pure relief when I noticed that phrase in there. Jesus knows that the battle against sin is difficult. For now, these causes last as well, but they will be burned.

13:40-43 - *As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.*
⁴¹ *The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.* ⁴² *They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* ⁴³ *Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.*

Has the kingdom of God really begun in this world? Evil and evil people seem to be carrying on just fine. We ourselves have plenty of struggles with sin. If the kingdom of God has begun at all, it may seem to us a feeble effort. This parable explains it.

One, the parable teaches us that it was a deliberate choice at the beginning of the kingdom to let evil people continue beside God’s people, and let the causes of sin continue as well.

God has made that choice about our world. In the parable, the choice was made because this way is easier for us, less traumatic. We may not think so, we’d like the evil gone, but then, we don’t know what that weeding looks like, so we cannot say.

Two, there will be a separating at the end, a weeding out, an powerful weeding, radical, severe, weeping and gnashing of teeth. We live in a world heading to that kind of harvest. Jesus wants us do know what’s going on, so he told this.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father! You must imagine Jesus saying this last line with a wide smile on his face, and waving his arms, and with lots of exuberance: *Then, finally, the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father! Whoever has ears, let them hear.* Amen.