

"Wheat and Weeds"
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Matthew 13:24-30

²⁴He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And 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?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let 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.’”

Matthew 13:36-43

³⁶Then 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.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the

age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

I. Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the first of several parables of Jesus that are collected by Matthew into one chapter, Matthew 13. Following in large part the order and outline of Mark's gospel, Matthew 13:1-9 gave us a parable about a sower, his seeds, and the soil that the seeds landed in. The seed didn't change from soil to soil, but the outcomes did. In one case, the birds ate the seed; in a second case, the seeds sprouted quickly but withered in the hot sun because their roots weren't established deeply enough in the soil; in a third case, the seeds sprouted amongst some thorns, whose roots choked the plants and killed them; and in a fourth case, the seed landed in good soil and produce an abundant and overwhelming crop. And in verses 18-23, Jesus gave us his interpretation of the parable. Each soil represents a certain type of person who responds to the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven in different ways. The first group rejects the proclamation and the enemy - Satan - takes away the seed. The second group accepts the proclamation but expects everything to be unicorns and roses, and at the first sign of trouble, they run away from the kingdom. The third group hears the proclamation but subordinates it to the pursuit of wealth and power and celebrity. And the fourth group hears and accepts the proclamation no matter what the cost or consequences of that choice are.

That's all well and good, but the parable on its own is kind of like a powerpoint slide show in which slide 1 = the first kind of hearer, slide 2 = the second kind of hearer, slide 3 = the third kind of hearer, and slide 4 is the fourth kind of hearer. But how do the different kinds of hearers relate to one another?

That's the question that Matthew's second parable attempts to answer. It bears many similarities to the first parable, and so part of this morning's sermon is going to sound similar to what you heard two weeks ago. But the parable contains a little twist at the end that the first one didn't. So despite some overlaps between the two, we will see that there are differences as well.

II. Pivot to Matthew

(**slide2**) The parable starts in verse 24 with a phrase that occurs several times in Matthew but, surprisingly enough, was not used in the parable of the seeds in verses 3-9: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (Ὁμοιωθή ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν; see also Matt 18:23; 22:2 and cf. Matt 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 20:1 [ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν]; 25:1 [ὁμοιωθήσεται ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν]). Matthew rarely refers to "the kingdom of God" even though the two phrases are semantically identical [Matt 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43]; by contrast "the kingdom of God occurs 14 times in Mark and 31 times in Luke [and only twice in John] while the phrase "the kingdom of heaven" never occurs in either Mark or Luke [or John]). References to the kingdom of heaven are not limited solely to Jesus' preaching. According to Matt 3:2, John the Baptist's sermon summary was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν), identical to Jesus' proclamation in Matt 4:17 (Μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν). Well, telling everyone to repent because "the kingdom of heaven has come near" begs the question of what the kingdom of heaven is, and why we should repent. The parables, then, are an attempt to teach us what the kingdom of heaven is and how we are to live

our lives of faith as members of that kingdom (so, rightly, Keener SRC 387 ["rather than implying that the kingdom is equivalent to the first actor stated Thus the kingdom need not be the landowner; rather, the situation with wheat and darnel is analogous to the situation with the kingdom"]).

(slide3) In this case, the parable strikes a somewhat ominous note. It begins, as the first one did, with the language of sowing: "someone who sowed good seed in his field" (verse 24b). Note that in this case it is the seed that is defined as good (καλὸν σπέρμα) and not the soil, the way it was in verse 9 (τὴν γῆν τὴν καλὴν). And note also that the issue isn't the positive response of "the good soil" that produces massive amounts of produce versus the negative response of the first three groups. Instead, something sinister happens in verse 25: "but while everybody was asleep, an enemy (ὁ ἐχθρὸς; see also 13:28, 39 and elsewhere in Matthew only 5:43, 44; 22:44) came and sowed weeds (ζιζάνια; in the GNT eight times but only in this parable and its interpretation [cf vv 26, 27, 29, 30, 36, 38, 40]; cf LSMJ 756 for the word in classical Greek texts) among the wheat, and then went away." Why on earth would someone do something like that? One commentator notes that "Ancient legal sources show that feuding, rival farmers occasionally did sow poisonous plants in one another's fields" (NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible on Matt 13:25; Nolland NIGTC 545, notes that "Kerr, 'Matthew 13:25', 108–9, has drawn attention to a reference in *Digest* 9.2.27.14 (the *Digest* is a summary and codification of Roman law, published in A.D. 533 but including much earlier material) to sowing *lolium* ('darnel/tares') or wild oats in another man's crops and spoiling them"). Even today, rivalries between individuals can lead to unkind behavior; everyone knows of the narrative tropes like boy A beating up boy B because the former caught the latter saying "Hi!" to his girlfriend, or girl X pouring something on girl Y to prove who the alpha-girl is and to remind the latter not to flirt with the former's boyfriend. When I taught middle school, "accidents" quote unquote would occasionally happen to a student's project if said student was disliked by a group of colleagues. Even today I read in my social media feeds how people try to

undermine the colleague who wants the same promotion that they do, or who try to prevent a former rival from getting a job at their new company. So in a day without a lot of boundaries between properties and when most common people have to grow their own food in order to keep everyone fed, it shouldn't be a surprise that similar things happened way back then.

(slide4) What happens next? Verse 26 assumes that a certain amount of time has passed, because the next thing that happens is that "when the plants came up and bore grain (καρπὸν ἐποίησεν; compare ἐδίδου καρπὸν in verse 8 and καρποφορεῖ in verse 23 [so rightly Nolland NIGTC 545]; there appears to be no significant difference between the three idioms), then the weeds appeared as well." It is generally assumed by commentators that the "weeds" are something called "darnel ... a poisonous plant which frequently grows in wheat fields. In the early stages of growth this weed is difficult to distinguish from wheat" (Stine and Newman, UBS Handbook 421; see also Luz Hermeneia 2:254; Nolland NIGTC 545; Hagner WBC 1:383; France NICNT 545; LKeener SRC 386; ZIBBC NT 1:87. Davies and Allison new ICC 2:412 more cautiously state that "it is usually taken to mean darnel ... but the identification is uncertain." For a possible illustration of common wheat and darnel, see the study Bible notes to Matt 13:24-30). Difficult, but not impossible, because the slaves (οἱ δοῦλοι; other translations use "servants" [NIV], "labourers" [NJB]. Whatever the correct translation may be, these are clearly different from the "hired men" [μετὰ τῶν μισθωτῶν] of, e.g., Mark 1:20; John 10:12, 13; and in the LXX at, e.g., Lev 25:40, 53; Deut 15:18; Isa 16:14; 21:16) of the one who sowed the good seed recognized what was going on and asked, "Where ... did these weeds come from?" The master immediately realizes that this is the work of an enemy, and the slaves then ask "do you want us to go and gather them?" in verse 28.

(slide5) The master is more-or-less forced to say "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them" in verse 29. Why is that? Because by the time the grain has grown to a place where the two plants could be visually separated, "the number of weeds is so great that their roots have entwined with the roots of the wheat" (Davies and Allison

new ICC 2:414; see also Hagner WBC 1:384 ["the weeds would be so closely intermingled with the wheat that some of the latter would inevitably be pulled up with the former and thus be destroyed. The roots of darnel are stronger and deeper than those of wheat, so that the removal of one would often result in the uprooting of the other"]; France NICNT 526 ["it is too late to eradicate the darnel without damaging the wheat with which its roots are intertwined"]). So the only appropriate course of action is to wait, patiently, for the end of the growing season and to harvest both the weeds and the wheat for separate tasks: The weeds get collected first and are bound into bundles to be burned, most likely as fuel, and the wheat is collected second, bound into sheafs, and gathered into the barn for later processing (verse 30; note that the parable on its own does not carry any negative connotation about the darnel that is prepped for burning, most likely as fuel; see, e.g., Nolland NIGTC 546 ["Probably the bundles would have been used as fuel for fires, but the story has no investment in this side benefit"]; Hagner WBC 1:384 ["At that time the two will be gathered and separated, the weeds as fuel for burning, the wheat into the granary"]; Keener SRC 387 ["reapers could gather the darnel, which did have one use: given the scarcity of fuel, it would be burned"]. Davies and Allison new ICC 2:415 ["There is disagreement as to whether it was normal to gather weeds and to use them for fuel (so Jeremias, Parables, p. 225) or whether the custom was to burn the whole field after the wheat stalks had been cut off (so Gundry, Commentary, p. 265). Texts from antiquity do not resolve the issue, and both practices are known from modern times"] and France NICNT 526 ["probably indicates incineration as rubbish, though dried vegetation might also be used for domestic fuel"] are more cautious). But the workers are not to do anything in the moment, for fear of risking damage to the wheat; they have to wait and let the planting season give way to harvest time, because it is at harvest time that the wheat can be safely separated out from the weeds. And here is where the public proclamation of the parable ends.

And just like with the parable of the seeds and the soils, Jesus' interpretation of his own parable follows in verses 36-43. It is a little curious to me that verse 36 begins by saying "Then he left the crowds and went into the house." It is curious because this chapter seems to present Jesus as someone who moves between the public proclamation of the parables on the one hand, and the private explanation of his parables on the other. (slide6) So if we look back for a moment at the beginning of the chapter, we see the following outline:

Verses 1-9: Jesus addresses the crowds from a boat (verse 2) and tells them parables.

Verses 10-23: The disciples come and Jesus speaks to them in private.

Verses 24-35: Jesus addresses the crowds and tells them parables again (the pronoun "them" in

verses 24 [παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς], 31 [παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς], 33 [ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς] appears on the surface to refer to the disciples with whom Jesus is speaking vv 10-23, but most commentators conclude that Jesus is speaking to the crowds and that Matthew has omitted a specific note that the audience has changed; see, e.g., Nolland NIGTC 544 ["Matthew's failure to indicate clearly that Jesus is freshly addressed the cross at this point ('them' are the crowds; see verse 36) matches a similar lapse in Mark 4 (see vv 33-34)"]; Newman and Stine, UBS Handbook 420 ["this parable was addressed to the crowds"]; Hagner WBC 1:383 ["further parables are now presented to the crowd"]).

Verse 36-52: Jesus leaves the crowds, goes into the house, and speaks to the disciples in

private again (note that while most commentators see the parables in vv 44-52 as being addressed to the disciples [e.g., Nolland NIGTC 563 ("This is the first of three final parables in the second, addressed only to the disciples");] France NICNT 534 thinks that they are addressed to the crowds and that Matthew has given us another unmarked audience shift ["It seems more likely that Matthew intends his general rubric of verse 34 to cover what follows as well as what has preceded it: parables are for the crowd, explanation for the disciples. Once he has made that principle clear he does not need to spell out the audience changes which it entails"]).

That outline is probably intended as a literary device, not a genuinely historical narrative; for example, it's a little weird that Matthew goes from Jesus teaching from a boat in verse 2 to Jesus going into the house in verse 36 without any mention of the boat coming ashore (so, rightly, Allen old ICC 152 ["Mt.'s references to place in this chapter are very vague; vv. 2-9 were spoken in the boat. ... The reference here to τοὺς ὄχλους suggests that the whole of 2-35 was spoken in the boat. If so, Christ now disembarks and returns to the house. Since the reference to the boat and the house are borrowed from Mk., it seems probable that τότε ὁφείξ—οἰκίαν is an editorial insertion to introduce the explanation of the Tares"]).

(slide7) So how does Jesus explain the parable? Here the one who sows the good seed is Jesus himself, the Son of Man, and the seed which is sown is not the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven but is rather the individual followers of Jesus, called "the children of the

kingdom" (οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας, only here and Matt 8:12 [where it refers to the children of Israel] in the LXX/GNT) in verse 38. In exactly parallel fashion, the enemy who sows the weeds is the devil (ὁ διάβολος), and the weeds that are sown represent "the children of the evil one" (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ, only here in the LXX/GNT; note that while most take τοῦ πονηροῦ as a reference to the devil, some consider it to be an adjective describing "evil individuals"; see, e.g., Nolland NIGTC 559 ["While τοῦ πονηροῦ could mean 'of the Evil One', it is more likely to be 'of evil' here ... The idea is that their behaviour is characterised by evil"]). And the field - the arena of their conflict - is the world (ὁ κόσμος). And so while some of the elements are the same, the point of the parable is very different from what we saw in the parable of the sower. In that parable, the main point was to exhort those who are sowing the good word of the kingdom of heaven to a lost and dying world to keep on keeping on even if people don't respond positively to the message. It was a reminder to us that the depth of faith and commitment and where we prioritize the gospel's message in relation to the cares and concerns of life will affect the fruit we bear as the disciples of Jesus.

But here, the point is different. Here, the conflict that is raised by the emergence of the kingdom of heaven in the world comes to the forefront. No longer is the conflict something internal and under our control. It isn't a question of whether I value the two Sausage McMuffins and a large black coffee that I can buy at McDonalds for less than 5 bucks on my way to summer school more than I value the gospel that I preach. It isn't a question of whether I value the gospel more than my own financial security. Both of those questions are questions that I have to ask and only I can answer.

(slide8) Now the conflict is one between the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one. The parable reminds us that the kingdom we pledge our allegiance to is at odds with those who pledge their allegiance elsewhere, and that is what gives birth to the spiritual

conflicts we all experience in the world. The apostle Paul reminds us that "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Much the same thing is implied in Jesus' parable.

And how are the disciples supposed to handle that conflict? The answer that Jesus gives isn't one that appeals to many today: we wait until the end when the children of the kingdom and the children of the evil ones are separated from each other and each one goes their separate ways: "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin (πάντα τὰ σκάνδαλα) and all evildoers (τοὺς ποιοῦντας τὴν ἀνομίαν), ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous (οἱ δίκαιοι) will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (vv 41-43).

III. Pivot to Today

(**slide9**) And those are the same messages the parable has for us today. **First**, it is a reminder and a reiteration that we who are members of the kingdom of heaven are not immune from or invulnerable to conflict with the world - or in the church, even though that's not what "the world" means. There will always be people who stand opposed to all the things that God stands for. That of course raises the question of what we are to do when that conflict inevitably arises. And the **second** lesson of the parable is that it isn't our job to engage the conflict when it arises. The wheat doesn't stop growing because it's surrounded by weeds. It just keeps on growing. Nor does the wheat try to expand its sphere of influence and thereby prevent the weeds from growing. Nor are the workers told to uproot the weeds and make the field more wheat-friendly. That's what most of us want to do, especially if you are someone like me who is

a fixer-upper-gotta-help-ya at heart kind of person. It hasn't happened yet, but if someone comes and begins to picket the church because we are "enabling" quote unquote homeless and hungry people by feeding them at St. Paul's, it's not our job to argue with them, to try and shut them down, or to call the cops. We are simply to go about our business as faithful followers of Jesus and feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, and clothes to the naked. A while back I posted something on Facebook and a respondent to that post called me "a satanic pastor." And while social media is often the place where differences of opinion wind up being verbal free-for-alls, I simply let it be, other than to share it on my Facebook page. Why didn't I respond in kind? Jesus calls us to *love our enemies*. Responding in kind to comments like that isn't loving. Jesus promises us that *we are blessed* when people persecute us. Personally, I like being blessed! And the workers were told to leave the weeds alone until the end, and in the end the wheat and the weeds will get their just rewards. So taking the long view of our eternal reward has to take priority over the short term satisfaction of responding in kind to someone like that.

Which brings me to the third lesson of the parable. When we are in the midst of conflict, it can sometimes feel as though the weeds are winning the conflict. In spite of what we may have been told by our parents, cheaters do sometimes prosper. People stack school boards, gerrymander voting districts, and try to change the legal rules so that their minority views can in fact win the conflict because they have the power to do what they want to do. For people who value love over power, compassion over privilege, mercy over ideology, and service over celebrity, seeing that happen in real life can be hard. Disheartening. Depressing. And in the moment, those feelings and reactions are real.

But the entire biblical message tells us that their victory won't last forever. The death and the resurrection of Jesus means that while it *may look like* the weeds are winning in the here and now, *the wheat is sure to win at the end*. What will that winning look like? According to verse 43, "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." That's what we will be. According to Matthew 25:10, we who are ready will go into the wedding banquet. That's where we will feast. And according to Matthew 25:46, "the righteous [will go] into eternal life." That's where we will spend the rest of eternity. Sounds pretty darn good to me.

Hence, this parable is best read as a source of great comfort for the church: comfort in knowing that whatever conflict you are experiencing hasn't escaped the eyes of God. Comfort in knowing what God calls you to do and who God calls you to be in the midst of your conflict. And comfort in knowing the eternal reward that awaits all God's obedient, righteous, and faithful children. Hallelujah! And amen.