

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message Parable of the Wheat and Weeds

Scripture Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43 (Also Mark 4:26-29)

The use of parables and picture-stories was not an unusual method of teaching in the first century. Many of the Jewish rabbis used illustrations taken from everyday life to help their disciples to understand the main points of their teaching. There was a point in Jesus' ministry when He felt it necessary to adopt this method in His public teaching.

Jesus understood the attitudes of the people who gathered around Him. He recognized that very few individuals were genuine disciples. Many, like the religious leaders, had hearts which were so hardened and minds which were so closed that they refused to accept what He wanted them to know. They listened to Jesus only to find fault and to criticize Him. Therefore Jesus used parables to veil and hide the deep truths of His teachings.

Many of the Jews were losing interest in Jesus' teaching. There had been great excitement when John the Baptist, and then, later, Jesus, proclaimed that the kingdom was at hand. Large numbers of people went out to where John was preaching, and many were baptized in the Jordan as an expression of their readiness to meet the Messiah. People were excited when Jesus demonstrated extraordinary supernatural powers through His healings and miracles. They considered these powers to be confirmation that Jesus was the One who would restore the power and influence of Israel.

However, after listening to the Sermon on the Mount, many of the early followers of Jesus became disappointed. The kingdom that Jesus described was not what they had in mind. They envisioned a physical kingdom, while Jesus taught them about a kingdom which was spiritual. They thought in terms of earthly power and influence and retribution, while Jesus focused on characteristics such as humility and servanthood and loving enemies. They wanted someone to rally political and military forces to overthrow the oppressive Roman army, but Jesus did nothing to encourage this activity. As time went on, Jesus became more and more of a mystery person to the people. The priorities of Jesus were not their priorities.

Jesus, on the other hand, pushed ahead with the training of His disciples. He was happy to educate everyone who was eager to learn. Jesus wanted His disciples to know about all aspects of the kingdom because He was preparing them to be His representatives on earth after His death and resurrection. Parables were the perfect method by which He could explain kingdom truth to them.

Today we will think about a very important passage. It is usually titled the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds.

Read Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Jesus told this parable to a large crowd. What the people heard was a description of an ordinary problem that many farmers in the Middle East had — a particular kind of weed which grew in the midst of good grain. The listeners probably didn't understand the part of the parable in which Jesus attributed the weeds to the deliberate action of an "enemy," but they would have agreed with everything else that Jesus described because it happened every year. And at the end of the parable, they probably thought "OK, so what?"

The deep meaning was not given until later when Jesus was alone with His disciples. The fact that they could gather inside a single house is a clue to how few disciples wanted to understand. Jesus clearly identified to them every important aspect of His story. The One who sowed the good seed was the Son of Man, Jesus Himself. The field was the world. The good seed represented the sons of the kingdom — those who belonged to the kingdom of heaven. The weeds were the sons of the evil one. The enemy who sowed the weeds was the devil. The harvest referred to the end of the age, and the harvesters were angels. The definitions were specific, and the disciples would not have had any uncertainties about what the parable was all about.

Neither would they have had any uncertainties about the theme of the parable. Jesus had specifically stated that the subject was “The kingdom of heaven.” In telling the parable, Jesus mentioned the “man who sowed good seed.” In later verses it became clear that He was describing Himself as not only the “sower,” but also the sovereign Lord of the Harvest. The disciples learned that Jesus was the One who would place His people in His world. Furthermore, He was the One who could understand what was going on, the One who would give instructions about the work and control the action. He would be the One who would call in the angels to remove “everything that causes sin and all who do evil” from the world at the time of harvest at the end of the age, and Jesus would be the One who would be in charge of the judgment.

The disciples were being instructed about the circumstances of the kingdom age, and the parable which seemed so ordinary in the telling suddenly became very multifaceted. The disciples learned that Jesus would be the sovereign Ruler of the age, and that He would be raising up people for the kingdom. They learned that the devil would be engaged in destructive work on the earth. They learned that there would be tension between the followers of Jesus and the followers of the devil, and they learned how they were to live in the midst of evil. They understood that the number of kingdom people would increase, and that the increase would come in spite of the devil’s opposition. And they learned that there would be a day when evil people would be separated from righteous people.

In His interpretation of the parable, Jesus revealed some never-before-announced information about Himself, about the growth and value of His spiritual kingdom, and about the eventual and total defeat of evil at the end of the age. There are a lot of important, thought-provoking, theological ideas which emerge from the interpretation, so let’s analyze the information in a little more detail.

This parable illustrates the problem of evil in the world. Good and evil are inextricably linked together in humanity, just like the roots and stalks of wheat and weeds become intertwined as the plants grow. All of us can recognize the mingling of evil with good in our world. This can be seen in all levels of human culture, in all forms of government and business, in communities and individual homes, and even in church fellowships. This mingling is inevitable when both the “sons of the kingdom” and the “sons of the evil one” grow in the same field.

It is important to note the interplay between good and evil. In the parable, the good seed, representing the sons of the kingdom, was sown first. The Owner was the One who took the initiative; He made the first move. The devil came at a later time, secretly and under cover of darkness, to sow worthless seeds of corruption.

It has always been this way. The devil is not creative. He can only pervert and corrupt what already exists.

We can recognize this sequence at the time of creation. God made the world perfect in every detail. Creation was everything that God wanted it to be. The first humans were without sin, and there was close fellowship between Creator and creature. It was into this situation that the devil first sowed the seeds of evil, causing God's good creation to become contaminated with sin.

Let's think about this sequence in another important way. The Kingdom has advanced in history and to all parts of the world through the sovereign and creative activity of the Lord, although we know from Scripture that He accomplishes His work through those individuals He calls to Himself and sends out as His witnesses. The seed sown by Jesus Christ through evangelists and missionaries has been producing a harvest among many of the people groups of earth. Yet, invariably, the devil follows after these workers in order to corrupt the Church, raise up opposition and persecutors, cause disunity and mistrust, create doubt and fears, and tempt believers into bad behaviors. The devil's purpose is always to pervert and corrupt and limit the good harvest of souls.

The parable makes clear that the Son of Man, Jesus, is the Owner / the Husbandman / the Lord of the world. As the Scripture states, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (*Psalms 24:1*). This means that the devil is messing around on property which does not belong to him. He is a trespasser, he is the "evil enemy" of Jesus, and he is intent on spoiling the good growth that Jesus wants to bring to fruitful maturity. Believers correctly describe their encounters with the devil as "spiritual warfare."

The servants of the “Landowner” were surprised when they discovered the weeds. They knew that the Master had sown good seed. The weeds in this passage are sometimes referred to as “tares” for a good reason: they are “terribly” difficult to eradicate.(!) The weed referred to in the parable is a member of the grass family which closely resembles wheat. It is indistinguishable from wheat until the heads on the stalks begin to form. The problem with the weed is that a fungus often embeds itself in the heads of the plant, which makes it poisonous enough to cause sickness in people who mistakenly consume it.

Believers often ask the same questions the servants asked, “How did this happen? Where did the weeds come from?” If God is a good God, and the kingdom of heaven has come into the world, then how is it possible for an evil enemy to have the ability to cause so much pain and suffering? Why is there so much injustice and exploitation and oppression and deception in the world? How is it possible for such levels of wickedness to coexist with the mercies and goodness of God? Didn’t God love the world so much that He sent His Son to reestablish His heavenly kingdom on earth? “Lord, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the evil come from?”

Scripture does not provide clear thorough answers to these questions. We have only a little information in the Bible about Satan’s rebellion against God in the heavenly sphere. Because he was unable to stand up to his Creator God there, the spiritual battleground shifted to earth. We have only a brief account of his role in tempting Adam and Eve at the time of creation. Because of their willingness to listen to him, all of humanity was spiritually separated from the Creator God and Satan gained great authority over the human race. Because he introduced disobedience into the human race, people not only became participants in the conflict between good and evil, they became the center around which the conflict revolves. Early on, the devil recognized that he could not engage in a battle against God directly, so ever since he has been fighting God by fighting against God’s people.

What we know about the conflict between good and evil is limited. For the most part, the Bible treats this subject as a mystery that we do not need to know. The Bible’s approach to the problem of evil is essentially practical. Scripture is not so much concerned to explain the presence of evil as it is to instruct us about the victory over evil which was accomplished by Jesus. The Bible’s goal is to provide assurance and encouragement to suffering believers. We are encouraged to voluntarily, willingly yield ourselves to God, and then through the power of the Holy Spirit to honor and glorify God through the ways we act and think.

This parable illustrates how believers are expected to live here on earth. They are to live as kingdom people in the midst of evil circumstances. Believers, not non-believers, are the devil's specific targets. The devil seeks to spoil and limit the growth and development of kingdom people. He spreads his "phony wheat" wherever the good seed is sown by Jesus. Jesus explained that the tension between good and evil will remain until the end of the age, and it calls for believers to have patient endurance.

The servants of the Landowner volunteered to pull up the weeds. However, the Landowner quickly advised against this. He did not want the good growth to be trampled on or to be pulled from the soil in the process of removing the weeds. The only logical procedure was to let both grow until the time of harvest, when every stalk, good and bad, would be cut down. That's when the weeds would be separated from the stalks of wheat.

The willingness of the servants to go into the fields was commendable. However, they were neither wise nor capable enough to accomplish good without causing damage. Jesus was unwilling for humans to go into His field in order to deal with the problems of spiritual evil. It is my opinion that even today Jesus does not trust his followers to root out and destroy evil. Unfortunately, there are some Christians today like those servants in the parable. Under the banner of maintaining the purity of the church by rooting out evil, some overly zealous church members have caused untold damage in church fellowships by passing judgment on the spiritual qualities of their fellow believers. According to Jesus, the only entities with the power and discernment to remove evil in the world are angels.

When I lived in Iran, there was one occasion when I walked behind harvesters of wheat. They were using hand sickles to cut the grain, which was an incredibly slow and back-breaking way to do the work. I have two vivid memories of my day in the harvest field. I noticed that the harvesters had leather wrapped around their left arms and hands. They would grasp the stalks with their left hand before cutting. The problem in the fields of Iran was thistles. In spite of the protection of the leather, the arms and fingers of the workers were bloodied because of the thistles which they encountered. The second memory is what the workers did after cutting a handful of the stalks. The thistles were carefully separated from the good grain and tossed onto a huge pile. I didn't get to see the burning of the thistles at the end of the day, but there must have been a huge bonfire.

Jesus described a fire at the time of harvest which was much bigger and more devastating than any manmade bonfire could be. The weeds which will be burned in the fire at the end of the age are people. The reaping will be the responsibility of angels. The “fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” describes the horrors of Hell, the final abode of unrepentant wicked people. Verses 40 through 42 bring up images in our mind which are dreadful to contemplate, (*Compare II Thessalonians 1:7-9*) and should make us carefully reflect on the priorities of our lives.

In contrast, the situation of the people identified with the wheat is all the more wonderful. In the telling of the parable, Jesus said that the wheat would be brought into His barn. In the interpretation, He said that the wheat people will be identified as righteous, and that they “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father.”

Should we be concerned about the evil in our world? Yes, of course, but as believers, we must not be overly focused on evil. Instead, we must keep our thoughts and activities focused on Jesus and the ways of the kingdom. Jesus was fully aware of the evil that exists in our world. His parable should give us hope and courage in the face of that evil. Although evil is mixed into our experiences at the present time, it will be fully eradicated from God’s kingdom at the end of this age, and that is when God’s people will shine with heavenly brilliance and glory.