

The parable of the wheat and the weeds * Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
September 24, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

There's an interesting question at the heart of our parable for today:

Why does God allow good and evil to co-exist in the world?

There are many good and generous people out there, people who go out of their way to help other people. And yet at the same time, there are many more who will expend just as much energy taking advantage of others, no matter what kind of pain, suffering and distress they cause.

This reality begs the question – Why does God allow good and evil to exist side-by-side like that? If God is good and all powerful, why doesn't He just step in and wipe out the evil doers so that only the good will exist in the world?

The parable that we're going to look at today answers that question, so turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 13:24 and we'll check it out. Matthew 13:24, another of Jesus' parables, that helps us to think about why on earth God allows good and evil to co-exist. Matthew 13:24.

As you can see, Matthew 13:24 follows hot on the heels of last week's parable, the parable of the sower and the four soils, and since Jesus is already thinking in terms of farming, He gives us another agricultural image.

24 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 root up 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.' "

(Mat 13:24-30 NIV).

Now remember, the people hearing Jesus' talk in Matthew 13 have never heard this story before. This is all they hear – the story about a farmer and an enemy who sows weeds in his field – so let's spend some time thinking about the parable in and of itself.

The Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus says, is like this: a man sows seed in his field. The man goes out and sows GOOD seed in His field. It's not rotten, it's not infertile; it's good seed and the farmer expects that it will grow.

But at some point in the night, an enemy comes along and sows weeds in among the wheat.

Now what I learned with week is that this enemy didn't just sow generic 'weeds;' he sowed 'zizania.' Archaeologists and scholars think that this refers to 'lolium temulentum' – more commonly known as bearded darnel – which looks like wheat and can be hard to distinguish from wheat until the grains start to form. So you've got weeds in the field, but not like a dandelion in the midst of your cucumbers. You've got weeds and wheat that look alike; it's only the fruit that tells them apart.

When the grain starts to form, the man's servants realize that something's up and so they ask the farmer – 'didn't you sow good seed in the field? Where'd the weeds come from?' Again, we get a note that the seed is good.

The farmer knows exactly what's happening and says 'an enemy has done this' and then the servants quite naturally say 'well, do you want us to go out and rip out the weeds?' 'No,' he says 'because if you rip up the weeds, you'll rip up the wheat and I don't want that to happen. We'll leave it to harvest and burn the weeds in the end when we bring in the wheat.'

This is what a kingdom of heaven is like: a sower whose good seed is sabotaged by an enemy, who nonetheless tolerates the weeds so that the wheat can grow and be gathered in at harvest, while the weeds are ultimately burnt up.

This is what the Kingdom of Heaven (on earth) is like. This parable teaches us three basic things about the Kingdom of Heaven, about how God works:

1. The weeds and the wheat grow together.
2. The farmer tolerates the weeds so that the wheat can grow.
3. The weeds will be incinerated at the end, while the wheat is brought into the barn.

I'm a little surprised that Jesus didn't end this parable by saying 'Let him who has ears to hear, listen' because that seems like a fitting conclusion to this parable but as you can see in verse 31, He had more parables to tell.

But the point stands, doesn't it? If we want to know the true meaning of this parable, we need to hear with ears that are willing to hear. Because this parable isn't just about wheat and weeds, is it? This parable is about God's posture towards good and evil in the world.

And we know that because Jesus' disciples cornered Him later – you can see it in verse 36 – and they said to Him. 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.' Out of all the parables that Jesus told that day, that one caught their attention and they wanted to know what it meant. And so Jesus explained. And this is by far the most detailed description of what means what when it comes to parables – usually we just see the things in the world of the parable and have to figure out what they refer to in the real world – but Jesus lays it all out for us here.

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 sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons 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.

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 fiery 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. He who has ears, let him hear.”

This is not about farming is it? This parable is all about God’s long-term strategy for dealing with good and evil in the world. Let’s talk it through.

The field in the parable is the world in real life.

The sower in the parable is the Son of Man. It’s Jesus.

The good seed/the wheat are people who hear the message the salvation, receive the message of salvation and put it to work in their lives. (They’re the good soil from last week). Just like John 1:12 says – to all who believe, Jesus gives the right to become children of God. In the language of the parable, when we believe, Jesus plants us in the Kingdom as ‘good seed’ (v. 37) and as sons and daughters of the Kingdom (vss. 37 & 43), all because of what Jesus did on the Cross.

The bad seeds/the weeds are people who hear that very same message and for whatever reason, ignore it, continuing to live for themselves apart from God. They are, in the language of the parable, bad seed, the children of the devil.ⁱ

Good and evil then, redeemed people and unredeemed people, live side-by-side in the world, the good doing good, the bad going what’s right in their own eyes.

Which brings us back to our opening question:

Why does God allow good and evil to exist side-by-side like that? If God is good and all powerful, why doesn’t He just step in and wipe out the evil doers so that only the good will exist in the world?

God tolerates evil so that this doesn’t happen. (Pull the weeds and flowers out of the flower pot together).

“While you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them” (v. 29).

When Jesus plants us as ‘good seed,’ He anticipates that we will grow and bear fruit for His Kingdom and He wants to give us every opportunity to do that. The bad seed/weeds in the parable get a lot of attention because of the whole burning up thing but we can’t lose sight of the fact that when a farmer plants a seed, he expects a harvest. He anticipates that something good will come from what he’s planted.

Same with Jesus; He plants us as ‘good seed’ anticipating that we will bear fruit that reflects the character of God. Jesus allows good and evil to grow side-by-side, because if He took out the evil, He’d uproot us too. Instead, He tolerates evil in the world to give time for the good seed to grow.

And notice, we ARE GOOD seed. Twice in the parable, Jesus tells us that the seed is good, which means that if you’ve received Jesus and become a child of God, you have everything within you that you need

to bear good fruit for the Kingdom. Ain't nothing wrong with the seed. As a child of God, Jesus has planted you with the potential to do great things for the Kingdom and to communicate the goodness of God in the midst of the weeds.

That's why good and evil co-exist in the world. God doesn't want to root us out while He's rooting out evil and so He waits patiently, tolerating evil until the time of the harvest.

And there will be a harvest.

Verse 41, Jesus tells us that there will be a harvest at the end of the age, a time of judgment where all of us will give account for what we've done with our lives.

The people who have kept on living for themselves, ignoring God and doing evil in the world will be like the weeds, gathered up and thrown in the furnace.

The people who have received the Gospel and borne fruit for the Kingdom, they will shine like the sunⁱ in the Kingdom of their Father. Just like the wheat is brought into the barn, all those who are faithful will be brought into the presence of the Lord to receive the glorious reward that Jesus has secured.

And notice that it IS Jesus who has secured it. It can be very easy to moralize this parable and say 'bear enough good fruit to get yourself into the Kingdom,' but look at what the parable says: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in the field; the Son of Man is the sower and the sons of God are the good seed that the sower sowed." JESUS made us good seed. JESUS planted us as children of God. We exist as sons and daughter of the Kingdom because JESUS Himself made us right with Him. He makes us good seed when we believe in Him and then helps us to grow into the fruit bearing people He's made us to be as we abide in and walk with Him.

Just like the parable, we can sum this up in three ideas:

1. In the Kingdom of God on earth, weeds and wheat grow side-by-side.
2. Jesus tolerates the weeds now to give us the chance to grow. And
3. When harvest time comes, the weeds will be incinerated while the wheat goes on to their reward.

God allows good and evil to co-exist in the world to give us time to grow and bear fruit before He ultimately wipes out evil in the end.

So what do I want you to do in light of this?

You know the saying 'you're growing like a weed'? We say that about kids all the time. You're growing like a weed!

Don't grow like a weed. Grow like a child of God.

That's what I want you to take home from this. Don't grow like a weed; grow like a child of God.

Jesus shows us that there are only two ways of living. The first is to live for yourself, ignoring God and doing whatever you feel like, regardless of the cost to others. That's growing like a weed Jesus would say. And what happens to weeds in the end? Crackle crackle. Fire. Poof.

The other way is to live like a child of God, rooted and established by Jesus Himself. That's what you want to do: grow like a child of God.

When you believe in Jesus and become a child of God, Jesus Himself plants you as good seed in the world. He plants you as a force for good in the world that can grow and overshadow the weeds of evil that pop up all around us. It's like Romans 14:21: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Nurture your faith as a child of God so that you grow into a fully formed believer. Abide in Jesus, spending time in His Word, so that you will bear fruit that reflects the goodness of God. Live in a way that reflects the character of Jesus.

It might be helpful to sit down sometime in the next few days and ask –

'is my use of language more like a weed or more like wheat?

Am I consuming things – from substances to media – the way a weed would or the way that wheat would?

Am I acting in the world the way a weed would or am I acting in the world like the precious wheat that I am?'

Invite the Spirit within you to bear fruit you in so that people will see that God is good. And know with utter confidence that as a child of God, you will live forever in the presence of God, all because Jesus Himself made the way for you to be restored to Him.

Don't grow like a weed. Grow like a child of God.

ⁱ Now here, I think, we'd better pause for a minute because it's possible to push the parable too far here. It's accurate from ten thousand feet, but theologically speaking, we can be more precise. Because it's not as if God plants some people and Satan plants some other people without God's knowledge and then they duke it out.

No, according to the Bible, there is only one kind of person: a valuable person, made by God, in the image of God, who has nonetheless chosen to turn from God and go their own way. To use the language of Ephesians 2, we're all stuck in the kingdom of darkness; to use the language of the parables, we're all weeds.

But then Jesus comes along. He comes along, having paid the price for sin so that all who believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life. He comes along, having paid the price for sin so that all who receive Him would become by right children of God.

When we turn from sin, trusting in Jesus, receiving Him and following Him, that's Jesus planting good seed. In the parable, the sower sows the children of the kingdom; in the real world, that's Jesus revealing His death and resurrection on our behalf and us responding by faith in Him. That's what it means that there are children of the kingdom in the world.

That's the sower sowing a child of God. When that happens, we are restored to God and made righteous because of Jesus; we become the wheat in this parable, bearing fruit to the end.

When people hear the Gospel and do nothing about it, that's the enemy in the parable sowing a bad seed. It is a person who has already turned away from God carrying on in the same direction, leading them to evil in the world.

ⁱⁱ See Daniel 12:3. "At that time ... your people... will be delivered.

2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

3 Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.