

# Changed Into Wheat

Genesis 28:10-19a | Romans 8:12-25 | Psalm 86:11-17 | Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

## **MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43**

<sup>24</sup> He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup> but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup> So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup> 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?" <sup>28</sup> He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" <sup>29</sup> But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup> 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.'" ... <sup>36</sup> 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.' <sup>37</sup> He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; <sup>38</sup> the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. <sup>40</sup> Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, <sup>42</sup> and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pyrrhus of Epirus was a Greek king who waged war on the Roman Republic about 300 years before the birth of Christ. A Greek city in modern day Italy asked Pyrrhus to come and help them against the Romans. And while Pyrrhus won major battles, his losses were significant. Plutarch, a historian from 200 years later, writes:

When he was twice victorious in conflict with the Romans, but lost many of his friends and commanders, he said, "If we are victorious over the Romans in one more battle, we are lost!"<sup>1</sup>

The losses were so great as to make him question whether it truly was a triumph. This is where we get the phrase, in fact, *Pyrrhic victory*. Because you see, not all victories feel like victory. Sometimes, in the midst of the battle, it can feel like defeat. As we ponder our own lives, and the reading from Matthew's Gospel, I wonder: What does it look like to win in end? And do we have the faith to get there?

As we started to see last week, the lectionary organizers have given us a few weeks in the parables of Matthew's Gospel. This week's parable—the so-called Parable of the Wheat and the Tares—is a difficult one. It is not difficult to understand. Like the one from last week, this is one of the few that Jesus explains. It is difficult because the content is hard. What Jesus explains is a picture of judgment in which angels come and collect evildoers and throw them into a furnace of fire. Given this, it makes one wonder, why has our typically spineless lectionary even

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 184C (Babbitt, LCL).

included it? Or more to the point, what are we supposed to take away from such a bleak picture? I think it is this: Just because the world is messy, it does not mean the kingdom of heaven has failed. God sorts it out, but in the end. It's an encouragement. Just because the world is messy, it does not mean the kingdom of heaven has failed. It gets sorted out in the end. And so, let's take a look.

### THE PARABLE

The parable, itself, is rather simple. In it, a farmer has sown good seed in his field. But while he slept, an enemy came and sowed weeds in the same field. And when the servants identified this problem to him—contrary to what most of us might expect—he decided to let the wheat and the weeds continue to grow side-by-side until the time of the harvest. At that point, the weeds will be collected and burned, and the wheat will be gathered into the barn.

In his explanation of this parable, Jesus identifies and explains several elements, but not all. This is important as an interpretive clue. It tells us, with a great deal of precision, on which parts of the parable to focus. And it tells us how to interpret them. We needn't get caught up in trying to explain what it means for the farmer to go to sleep or even why the man in the parable determined to let the weeds grow alongside the wheat—though there are reasonable agrarian explanations for that one.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the elements described by Jesus focus on the parallels of good seed and weeds, the Son of Man and the devil as those who sow, and the ultimate ends of fiery judgment or a shining kingdom. The only question remaining is why, why does Jesus focus on *these* parallels?

The answer comes, as it usually does in parables, from the immediate and circumstantial context. In this case, it is the introductory statement "*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...*"<sup>3</sup> This statement indicates that the parable is teaching us something about the kingdom of heaven. But what does that mean? That clue, combined with the specific language of the parable shows us. For many interpreters throughout history, the kingdom represents the church and only the church. As such, the parable becomes an explanation as to why sin persists in the faith community and even becomes a defence for encouraging Christians to continue sinning.<sup>4</sup> But I think that is a misreading.

In his explanation, Jesus says "*the field is the world.*"<sup>5</sup> The parable is not about the kinds of seeds sown in the kingdom, but about the kingdom of heaven presently coexisting with the kingdom

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<sup>2</sup> "What he sowed was *zizania* ("weeds"—almost certainly bearded darnel [*lolium temulentum*]), which is botanically close to wheat and difficult to distinguish from it when the plants are young. The roots of the two plants entangle themselves around each other; but when the heads of grain appear on the wheat, there is no doubt which plant is which (v.26)." See D.A. Carson, *Matthew (The Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 719*.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 13:24.

<sup>4</sup> Early church leaders, like Pope Callixtus I, used it, in talking about letting the tares grow with the wheat, to turn a blind eye on sin. See Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, 9.7 (ANF 5:131). The Donatists, who wanted a pure church, unpolluted with those who abandoned the faith during persecution, were refuted by Augustine, saying that the wheat and the tares coexist. See Augustine, *Answer to the Letters of Petilian the Donatist*, 2.26, 39, 79; 3:2 (NPNF1 4:545, 555, 570, 597-98); *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, 23 (NPNF1 6:334-35); *Ad Donatistas post Collationem*, 8; and *Contra Epistolam Parmeniani*, 3.2.11-14; *To the Donatists, Letters*, 76 and 105. For John Chrysostom, the question of the parable was whether it permitted or prohibited the killing of heretics. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 46 (NPNF1 10:288-89).

<sup>5</sup> Matt 13:38.

of the evil one in the world. In other words, it is answering a question: Doesn't the continuing presence of sin and death in the world mean the kingdom is failing?' Put yourself in the place of the original audience for a moment. 'The kingdom has arrived with Jesus. So, why are people still being horrible and sinning?' Or, following on from last week: 'If there are still people who are rejecting the Word of Christ through stubbornness, or because they're scared, or because they've been side-tracked by wealth and status, doesn't it mean the kingdom of heaven is compromised and being defeated? Shouldn't the world be better, with no sin and evil and death, if God's kingdom has already arrived?' For the disciples, it's a lingering question. 'If the kingdom is here, why hasn't Rome been overthrown, the sinners taken into judgment, and the new political kingdom of Israel been established?'<sup>6</sup> How are we to make sense of the notion that the kingdom of heaven has arrived, and yet judgment has not yet come to those who sin? The parable is addressing this very question. And the answer is simple. It's because this is the way the owner of the field wants to handle it. He is going to allow both wheat and weed to grow until the day of judgment finally arrives. We need not worry just yet. While it does not seem to be sorted out now, it will get sorted out in the end.

In fact, the verses the lectionary skipped reinforce this point. What separates the parable and its explanation are two more parables from Jesus, the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, both of which make the point that the kingdom of heaven *is* growing large and gaining influence. As we march on toward judgment day, we need not worry.

### THE POINT

But what does this mean for us? It means we should draw comfort. In a world that is unquestioningly full of weeds—people who sin with seeming impunity, people who disrupt the world with evil and malicious intent, proverbial foxes in henhouses, it can be quite discouraging to us. And I don't mean just the murderers and oppressors—I'm talking about the sinful capacity in all of us. The truth is, we all can be weeds. *We* are, sometimes, the unwanted wild plants slowly destroying the field, causing havoc and pain and disappointment in the world around us because we are too selfish, too self-focused, too broken in our hearts and careless in our ways. In a world that is messy, sometimes, very simply, we are the mess.

So, be warned. It is God's grace that the judgment does not come immediately. We have chances, over and over again, while judgment day has not yet arrived—chances to cling to the cross of Jesus Christ, to follow him in his death and resurrection, and to be a little less messy. Paul captures this notion at the beginning of our Romans reading:

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.<sup>7</sup>

Be warned. And yet, I also said we should be encouraged. Why? Even *our* present sin does not signal the failure of the kingdom of heaven. As we shall see in a few chapters: "*and the gates of Hades will not prevail.*"<sup>8</sup> God will sort it out in the end, and it is no Pyrrhic victory. You can be

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<sup>6</sup> See Acts 1:6.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 8:12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Matt 16:18.

encouraged that those who are enemies of the people of God, those who remain in rebellion against him, like weeds will be put in the furnace of everlasting judgment. And those whom God has chosen, whom he has planted and remain with him through repentance and faith, remaining until the end, *“will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”*<sup>9</sup> So, Christians, be encouraged.

## CONCLUSION

As I close, remember that Christ chose his people. Be encouraged. And then give your lives to him, because he calls us to live according to his Word, and not according of the ways of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Know that you are chosen and then spend your life being like wheat so that, in the end, you will be set aside to shine in the kingdom. Augustine put it like this: *“The Let the one who is wheat persevere until the harvest; let those who are weeds be changed into wheat.”*<sup>10</sup>

*Let me pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us hope in your Son on that last day, may we be found steadfast when he comes. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>9</sup> Matt 13:43.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 73A.1.9*; MA 1:249; WSA 3 3:295.