

# Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Genesis 28:10-19a | Romans 8:12-25 | Psalm 86:11-17 | 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

As Patrick mentioned last week, the lectionary organizers have given us several weeks in the parables of Matthew’s Gospel. And given how famous this one is—the so-called Parable of the Wheat and the Tares—it’s sort of upon me to address it now. The thing is, it’s an incredibly difficult parable. This is one of the few that Jesus explains, and what he explains is a picture of final judgment in which angels come and collect evildoers and throw them into a furnace of fire while the righteous are shining like the sun in the kingdom of God. It’s a picture of eschatological judgment that is very precise and leaves no wiggle room for interpretation. Whatever your “enlightened” position may be, you can’t ignore that Jesus himself describes this as the reality to which the parable points. At the very least, he believes in it. Nevertheless, interpretation of it through history has been controversial. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> For John Chrysostom, the question of the parable was whether it permitted or prohibited the killing of heretics.<sup>3</sup> Eschatological judgment, the supernatural, and controversy,—it’s honestly a wonder to me that the typically-spineless lectionary even includes it.

<sup>1</sup> Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, 9.7 (ANF 5:131).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 46 (NPNF1 10:288-89).

**THE PARABLE**

But the parable itself is rather simple. And the explanation of it is remarkably clear.

In the parable, a man 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 the problem to the man—contrary to all conventional farming—he decided to let the wheat and the weeds continue to grow side-by-side until the harvest. At that point, the weeds will be collected and burned, and the wheat will be gathered into the barn. It's a complex parable with a lot of parts and, so, a lot of possible interpretations.

Yet, in the explanation, Jesus identifies and explains seven elements from the parable. 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 Son of Man to go to sleep or even why the man in the parable determined to let the weeds grow alongside the wheat. Rather, the elements described by Jesus focus on the parallels of good seed and weeds, the Son of Man and the devil as sowers, 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 context. In this case, it is the introductory statement "*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...*" This statement indicates that the parable is teaching us something about the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, all the parables in this parables discourse, including the parable we heard last week and the two parables our passage skips, are kingdom parables. They are teaching us something about the kingdom of heaven which is—that is, it has come about in the present—and yet which is to come—that is, has yet to be fully realized.

What question does this parable answer? Here it is. Here's the main question: 'If the kingdom of God has already come, why aren't all of the problems solved?' For the disciples, it's a lingering question. For John the Baptist as well. '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?' How are we to make sense of the notion that the kingdom of heaven has arrived, and yet judgment has not come down on those who sin? The parable is addressing this very question. It's because this is the way the owner of the field, the Son of Man, wants to handle it. He is going to allow both wheat and weed to grow until the day of judgment finally arrives.

**APPLICATION**

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, it can be quite discouraging. And I don't mean just the horrific people—the murders and bigots and perpetrators of racial crimes as well as those who have buried skeletons in church closets—I'm talking about the sinful capacity in all of us. The carelessness of not wearing a mask and risking others' lives, the careless words uttered in anger at a loved one, the selfishness we display as stealthily as possible. The truth is, we all have the capacity to be weeds. In a world that has the gospel message, that has a church upholding biblical truth, we are, sometimes, the unwanted wild plants slowly destroying the field.

And so, in that last day, you might be wondering, what makes the difference? Is it how much time we spent being weeds versus being wheat? Is the severity of our sinfulness? What is it?

The difference in the parable was simply who sowed the seed in the first place. The difference is being sown by the Son of Man rather than being planted by the evil one. It's a question of belonging. Paul captures this notion at the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians:

...just as he [God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will...

Christ chose his people and then gave them adoption through his own blood, his death on a cross and resurrection. And so, be encouraged. 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.

### CONCLUSION

Augustine put the point like this:

The Lord then explained for us what he had said. See what we choose to be in his field. See which of the two we will be at harvest time. The field is the world, and the church is spread throughout the world. Let the one who is wheat persevere until the harvest; let those who are weeds be changed into wheat.<sup>4</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 it comes. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 73A.1.9; MA 1:249; WSA 3 3:295.