

# The Parable of the Weeds

By Brad Allison on 3/7/2004

Scripture Reference *Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

We are in a series on the parables of Jesus, and this one is often called the parable of the wheat and the tares. Our translation calls this a “weed”, and it is commonly understood to be speaking of a specific weed called “darnel.” This weed is a member of the grass family and very much resembles wheat. It is almost impossible to tell the difference until the wheat matures, at which time the grain allows for the easy distinguishing between the two. It is this similarity between the two that becomes the focus of the parable.

The parable is about a wealthy and powerful landowner who had an enemy determined to harm the landowner. He devised a plot that reminds me of some modern day industrial sabotage, not unlike an author of a computer virus who tries to bring harm to Microsoft. The enemy in the parable does his damage through sowing weeds in the fields where the other man had planted good seed. He came by night to do so, because he had not the power to come against his enemy in a more open way. He came and went undetected until the seeds germinated and then grew enough to distinguish the good seed from the bad. The servants of the landowner wanted to go and rip out the weeds, but the landowner wouldn't allow it. He reasoned that such an action would inevitably bring harm to the good wheat. It would be better, he said, to let both grow to maturity. It would then be an easy thing to tell the difference, and the wheat could be separated from the tares and each dealt with appropriately, storing the wheat in the barn and burning the tares.

Once again, it is not a difficult thing to interpret this parable, because Jesus gives us the interpretation. The landowner who sows the good seed is Jesus. The enemy who devises a scheme to bring harm is the devil. The good seed are the sons of God, while the bad seed are the children of the devil. The field is the world itself, the harvest is the final judgment and the reapers are angels. The parable teaches us God's response to evil in this world, and therefore how we should respond as well. It would help you to understand this parable if you could think about some time when you were hurt by some evil done against you. Some of you will have no trouble thinking of something, others may have to think hard about it. It doesn't have to be a great evil, just anything. Perhaps it's something as small as what I remember happening to us once when we lived in Maryland. The family took a trip one afternoon to our local public library, only to find when we returned to our car that someone had broken into it and torn up our car radio trying to steal it. I can remember feeling violated by that act. Someone had trespassed in an area in which they didn't belong and taken something from us. Can you think of something like that for yourself? Now think with me about your response to that. Our typical response is the same as the landowner's servants. We want to rip them up and throw them out. In other words, we want them to get caught and punished immediately. Jesus' disciples wanted the same thing. Do you remember that time when Jesus was traveling through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem, and one village there did not receive Jesus or his disciples. James and John expressed what many of us want to see when they asked Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54). Jesus answered in a manner consistent with the teaching of this parable. God says that it is not to be done this way, and in his response we learn how we ought to respond to those who bring evil to us. Two responses are taught here. They are coexistence in this present life, and divine separation in the future. Let's look at both of these and what they teach us.

## I. Coexistence in this Present Life

God gets a great deal of criticism on this point. Lots of people want him to act more quickly and decisively in ridding this world of its evil. In short, they want him to do what these servants wanted to do—rip up the offending seed and destroy it. This parable goes a long way toward answering the problem of evil. This problem is often stated like this: in light of the existence of evil, God cannot be both good and all-powerful. Since evil exists, then God might be good and simply unable to stop it. Or, on the other hand, he might be all-powerful but not good. But, this argument goes, he cannot be both good and all-powerful. Today's parable adds a third element that delivers us from this dilemma. It's the element of time. God is good and he will deal with evil, but he has a good reason for not doing so immediately. Using the imagery of this parable, Jesus explains why God waits to deal with evil. The owner of the field tells the servants not to pull up the weeds because such an action may disturb the wheat. This disturbance might occur because of the similarity between the wheat and tares, resulting in the uprooting of the wheat due to mistaken identity.

Illustration: One summer several years ago our son visited a friend of his in Pennsylvania for a week. The father of the household took pride in his various flower gardens that adorned his lot. While Matthew was there, this father decided that his son and Matthew needed to do some work to help out. So he set them to weeding his flowerbeds. To his horror when he returned home, Matthew had uprooted all of one of his good plants because he thought it was a weed. It is to prevent such destruction of the good plants that God says he waits to deal with evil. He waits until the maturing of the crops when both the wheat and the tares can be harvested and separated easily, resulting in no mistaken loss of wheat.

God's general approach to evil in this world is to be patient with it and allow it to come to maturity. In other words, he lets it run its course before bringing in judgment. He waits and allows evil to overreach, with the result that it collapses from its own weight. The classic example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus. I had the opportunity last week of seeing Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, and it did a very good job of portraying this. Evil seemed to be multiplying as everyone, the Jews and the Romans, conspired against Jesus. There seemed to be no hand to stop the advance of evil, including the hand of God himself, as the only innocent man ever to live was condemned as a criminal. He was even mocked by the Jewish leaders, who said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him" (Matt. 27:42). And there was only silence from heaven. Yet Satan was overreaching. Just when he thought he had won, he had actually lost, because it was the death of Jesus that became the key part of God's victory, allowing him to pardon sinners like you and me. Augustine likened God's work here to a mousetrap, with Jesus as the bait. And that old rat, Satan, took the bait and found his head crushed in the process.

Illustration: There is a great illustration of this in the climax of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Gollum had been thoroughly corrupted by his lust for the ring. Yet he had been spared repeatedly throughout the story. In the process of being the ring-bearer, Frodo too had begun to succumb to its evil influence. When the climactic moment came and Frodo was standing on the edge of the Fires of Mordor to destroy the ring by casting it in, he found he couldn't do it. He couldn't bear to part with the ring. It was then that the evil Gollum saved the day by continuing with his evil ways. He seized the ring, but in the process fell, ring and all, into the fires that brought the destruction of both. He was allowed to stick around until he became the most unlikely savior. That is the way of God with evil. Instead of dealing with it immediately, he allows it to grow to maturity until it collapses of its own weight.

This doesn't mean that we are to become passive in responding to all evil, because there is a time to do

what we can do to stop the advance of evil. Rather, we apply this by remembering that God says to his servants not to destroy the weeds now, but to wait until the harvest. The application is that we need not to write off too soon those we see as being evil. If God waits instead of writing people off who seem to be evil, we ought to do the same. God is patient with evil; we should be as well. This is especially true for us, because we are unable to distinguish the wheat from the tares. If we write someone off as being beyond hope of redemption, we run the risk of pulling up a stalk of wheat, thinking it's a weed.

Illustration #1: Mel Gibson was asked recently why he made his movie *The Passion of the Christ*. He responded, "I grew up in a religious home. A Catholic home, but I grew up wild and became a monster. When you are a monster you end up being deeply wounded. All I can tell you is that because of his wounds, my wounds have been healed." If we had seen him before this happened, it would have been easy to write him off.

Illustration #2: My wife's testimony is not dissimilar. Though she was not a believer in high school, she was invited to a church youth group which she began attending. She says now that she was a flirt and a bad influence on others, and many parents would not allow their daughters to be with her. But one couple there did not write her off. They befriended her, gave her rides to and from youth group, and invited her into their home and lives. She looked to many like a weed in God's field, but she has turned out to be a fruitful stalk of wheat, in part because someone there didn't write her off.

God's response to evil in this life is to let it go. He is patient and calls us to do the same. So don't step in to try to help God out by pulling up weeds and writing people off. You may find yourself pulling up some wheat. No matter what evil others may have brought into your life, God's call to us is for patience. Don't write off that co-worker who seems so far from the Lord, that spouse or child who looks exactly like a big weed in God's field. Follow your Lord and be patient.

## II. Divine Separation in the Future

Many make the mistake of thinking that since God seems to be silent in judging evil now, there must not be any judgment ever. Jesus teaches us here that judgment is like a harvest, in that it comes at the end. The farmer knows that the two times of intense activity are sowing and reaping, with a great deal of waiting in between. Harvest is a common theme throughout the Bible for judgment, and he says here that the harvest will be a time of separation between the wheat and tares. After they are separated, they experience two different futures. The wheat is gathered into the barns, while the weeds are left to be burned.

There are at least two important applications of this. First, it is by believing in a future judgment that we are allowed to refrain from seeking vengeance on those who may bring harm to us. There are some who say, "I just can't believe in this barbaric notion of a God who brings judgment upon people." Others have pointed out that such a statement reveals someone who has never been victimized by another's evil. It is only as we believe in a God who will one day set the record straight and bring evildoers to account that we can ourselves refrain from vengeance. The Christian can return good for evil precisely because he believes God will one day set all things straight, and therefore he doesn't need to do so himself.

The second application is to ponder your own future by asking yourself what time will reveal about you. Everyone in this room today is either wheat or tare. Just as it is easy for us to look at others and not be able to tell who is wheat and who is tare, it is also easy to make that same mistake about ourselves. But the time is coming when the harvester, who never makes a mistake about these things, will judge. In that day, it matters not at all what you consider yourself to be. The only thing that matters is the judgment of the perfect judge. Which will he say about you on that day—wheat or weed? Time will reveal all, but you can also know that before the Judgment Day. You can't know and judge someone else, but God requires that you know and judge yourself. How can you do so?

There are three tests of true wheat in our text that can help us in this area. Those who are truly wheat have learned to stop striving, to stop seeking their own glory and to start listening. The first test is indicated by this process of growth. As the wheat grows, it produces grain, and it is ultimately the presence of grain that demonstrates the difference between the wheat and the weed. But it is precisely this feature that cannot be manufactured. Each one of us is born

a weed, and we must be transformed into a stalk of wheat. But none of us is able to do that. Those who are truly wheat have learned their inability, and have therefore come to depend instead of strive. They have learned something about resting instead of working. Have you learned anything about that yet? Have you learned anything about what Jesus meant when he said that our first duty is to rest. He worded it like this: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29).

True wheat has also learned to stop seeking its own glory. That is indicated in this promise to the righteous that they “will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (v. 43). It’s talking about our future in heaven, and says of that time that the righteous will shine. Believing that about our future will deliver us from having to shine now. If you bought stock in Walmart in 1970, and you knew then what we all know now about how successful this company is, then you would be content to wait for its ascendancy. In the same way, true followers of Jesus don’t seek glory now, because we know that the time of truly shining will not be in this life.

Finally, an indication that you are really wheat and not a tare is found in something that is common to many of the parables. Jesus closes this one like so many, with this statement, “He who has ears, let him hear.” What does this mean? Jesus is saying that one of the clearest indicators of true salvation is simply listening to Jesus. Those who are really wheat listen when Jesus describes hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is common language in many of the parables, and we are going to look at it in greater detail later. But for now let me simply point out that we need to hear Jesus as he speaks to us about this.

#### CONCLUSION:

In a group this size, it is very likely that there are several here who have been in a feud with God about some evil that has come into your life. Perhaps it’s an evil person, or maybe just a product of living in a fallen, evil world. But you have been giving God the silent treatment since it happened. Jesus’ parable can help you. Jesus says that God doesn’t act immediately to end this evil because he doesn’t want his precious wheat uprooted. In other words, if God acted to destroy evil, he would have to destroy you as well. So what God does instead is to send his Son to be victimized by this evil, and he doesn’t raise a hand to stop it. God’s hand was stayed for your sake. Because Jesus was victimized by sin, you can know God loves you and you can be patient in the face of the world’s evil.