

**Parables of Jesus//Portraits of the Kingdom
Part Three – The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat**

**July 21, 2024
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Matthew 13:24-43

Lines and Fields

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of their own heart?”¹

Alexander Solzhenitsyn penned this paragraph at the pinnacle of his examination of the horrors of the Soviet gulags. While there is some overlap with Jesus’ reminder to deal with the evil in ourselves before dealing with it in others (Matthew 7:5), his metaphor is wrong. Good and evil are not divided by a line, *Matthew 13:24-43* shows us they grow together in a field.

At the center of Jesus’ parable about weeds and wheat is the question:

- Why does evil persist?
- If Jesus has come and won, why are bad things still happening?

It answers that the weeds are allowed to continue to grow for the sake of the wheat. Good and bad will grow together until Jesus returns.

Two Views of History

Jesus is giving us a Kingdom perspective on history. A third way in between two other popular views of history.

One is the view of Pixar film *Wall-E*. It presents history as a slow decline into garbage.

The other view is that of Star Trek. Humanity is on a never-ending upward trajectory to becoming technologically and philosophically ascendant.

These perspectives are not just from made up stories, as Ursula Le Guine once said:

“Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.”²

These are very serious perspectives put forward by theologians, philosophers and futurists. And they haven’t got the whole picture.

¹ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 1, pg. 168.

² Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, introduction.

A Farmer's Theology of Evil

Jesus' parable is one of the clearest theological perspectives on evil in the Bible. God has made a good world, the Sower sowed good seed. But an enemy has come and planted weeds.

The nature of these weeds is important to understanding Jesus' perspective on evil. The weed mentioned is called 'Darnel.' Darnel is poisonous to ingest and has two important features.

- Darnel is difficult to differentiate from wheat. Until it has come to a head, Darnel is almost identical to wheat.
- Darnel is difficult to separate from wheat. Darnel wraps its root system around wheat roots so that if you pull up one you pull up the other.

To sow Darnel in a wheat field was a heinous act of revenge, one that apparently happened because there were Roman laws prohibiting the practice.³

Why Evil Persists: For the Growth of the Good

The servants ask the master:

“Do you want us to go and pull them up?” – **Matthew 13:28b**

Behind this question we can feel many other questions in the Gospels. The disciples wanting to call fire on towns that reject Jesus (Luke 9:54). John the Baptist doubting that Jesus was the Messiah (Matthew 11:1-15). Peter swinging a sword at a slave of the high priest who captures Jesus (John 18:10).

But the master in the parable responds to the servants:

“No, because while you are pulling the weeds you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. Let them grow together until the harvest.” – **Matthew 13:29**

Many expected a military Messiah who would undo evil forever, and with violence. They must have been surprised that, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, evil persists. Jesus tells them why here.

It is for the good of the wheat that the weeds are allowed to grow. Good and evil will grow together until Jesus returns.

The Apostle Peter faced a similar question, why hadn't things seemed to change after Jesus' resurrection, *where was this second coming?*

³ See R.T. France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*.

He replies:

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” – **2 Peter 3:8-9**

Final judgement is final, so it is delayed by Jesus in order that as many as possible will come to repentance. And this is the ‘thing hidden since the creation of the world’ (Matthew 13:35) Jesus is sharing. This is the surprise. Good and evil growing together for a season.

A Kingdom perspective on the world, then, is realistic. We see good and we see evil.

But Jesus wedges two parables about Kingdom growth in the middle of this section (Matthew 13:31-33). It seems Jesus is tempering our expectations. Yes, the world will have good and evil grow. But amid it, secretly and subversively, the Kingdom of God will be growing.

For us today, we tend to think of Christianity as declining because we center our focus on the West. But in the Global South Christianity is on the rise like never before. To the world we are realistic, when it comes to the Kingdom our virtue is hope.

Focus on Sowing Seeds, not Pulling Weeds

It is surprising that Jesus differentiates between the servants the master is speaking to and a category he calls the harvesters or reapers. Servants would be expected to do all the work. This may be for our benefit, to remind us:

Baby, we’re not the reapers.

Matthew 13 begins with the parable of the Sower (vv1-23). That parable does not give an identity to the Sower and invites the listeners to imagine themselves in that role. The application is this:

Focus on *sowing* seeds, not *pulling* weeds.

Why don’t we focus on pulling weeds? Why is our job not primarily to root out evil?

- Because evil can be difficult to differentiate from good.
 - Consider our democratic and capitalist system. It brings us many good things but at a high price to other countries and the environment. Is it good or evil? Or both?
- Because evil can be difficult to separate from good.
 - The French and communist revolutions are great examples of people trying to pull up evil and, in the crossfire, many good people lost their lives.

So how do we facilitate this identity shift?

We don’t act like reapers.

- Reapers are sorters. They see people as good or bad and judge them accordingly.
- Reapers are simplifiers. They take complex and moral ambiguous situations and make them simple to aid in sorting people.
- Reapers are wrathful. They tend to violently separate themselves from others based on what they see as good and evil. Sometimes just be cutting people out, sometimes by physical violence.

Instead, we should see ourselves as Sowers. The ‘Sower’s axiom’ from this parable is that ‘its’ not yet harvest, people are in process.’

- Sowers are inviters. If people are in process, they can still be invited to join into the goodness of God’s Kingdom, no matter what they’ve done or how far they’ve fallen.
- Sowers are sensible. We do not need issues simplified because we serve a King of limitless power and wisdom. Where the world offers two options, Jesus usually offers a third way.
- Sowers have soft hearts and heard feet. Kingdom people live in paradoxes. Tender and tough. Crafty and innocent. Full of love and full of anger at injustice. Totally engaged in the world yet not overly attached to the results of our work.

We sow good seed because the hope of harvest is secured. One day Jesus will undo all that is wrong with the world.

The Line Between

Good and evil, however, are not abstract concepts. Keeping them that way is dangerous:

"To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act of conformity with a natural law. Fortunately, it is in the nature of the human being to seek justification for his actions."⁴

As concepts, good and evil are malleable. The weeds and wheat are not good and evil, they are the people of the kingdom or the people of the evil one. The line between good and evil doesn’t run through our hearts, it is drawn in the sand by Jesus. He stands on the other side of that line and says ‘*Come, Follow Me*’.

So, if you’re concerned today, if you’re afraid. If you feel caught in the jaws of a wicked world, cross that line that Jesus drew today. Cross that line every day. Look not to the left, nor to the right. See not the darkness of the valley or the splendor of the pasture. But only and ever keep your eyes on the Shepherd. For the place He leads us is good because He is good.

⁴ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 1, pg. 173.

Questions for Reflection

Open Up

Of the two views of history—it's *getting worse* or it's *getting better*—which are you prone to? What have you missed out on because of that proclivity?

Dig In

Read **Matthew 13:24-43** and consider the following:

1. How have you answered the question 'why does evil persist?'
2. When you think of Jesus delaying 'the harvest' for the sake of others, who comes to mind for you? Who are you praying will be in the Kingdom with you?
3. What issue in the world has you concerned right now? How would it look to approach this issue as a 'Sower' and not a 'Reaper'?
4. What benefits are there in remembering that the harvest is coming?

Prayer

It's not yet the harvest, the people are in process. This text gives us a great opportunity to pray for people we see as evil. Ask Jesus to show you these people through His eyes.