

# Weeds or Wheat? Or Both

## The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat

*Matthew 13:24-30*  
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Last Sunday we looked at the Parable of the Sower. We reflected that while some of our ministry efforts may prove to be unproductive (like the seed that fall on the hard, rocky, or thorny soil), some of the seeds of our ministry efforts nevertheless land on good soil, bringing what the parable describes as an unexpectedly abundant harvest. The parable, ultimately, is one great promise promise.

Today we move to the next parable in Matthew 13, known as the parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat, or the Parable of the Tares (which is another word for weed.) As we shall see, it is a parable of patience, tolerance, and hope.

If I had to pick just one parable that perhaps corresponds best to the overall vision and mission here at College Hill it would probably be this one. And this is why: **Its central message is one of tolerance and inclusion, including a strong edict to neither judgmentally condemn others nor seek to “purify” the church (nor the world).** Some things are better left to God to handle.

In order to more fully understand this parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat we first need a quick botany lesson. Just as we have certain weeds that we can easily recognize because of their familiarity in our yards, gardens and fields here in the Tulsa area, wheat farmers and others in ancient Palestine knew *exactly* what kind of weed Jesus was referring to in his parable.

The weed in question is called darnel. Darnel, a type of rye-grass, is a very clever weed. It doesn't stick out like a giant thistle bush would in a vegetable garden – or like all that clover in my yard. Rather, darnel looks so much like wheat that the two are almost impossible to distinguish from one another. This small bit of information plays a very crucial role when it comes to interpreting this parable, as we shall see in a moment.

It's not until each plant goes to seed, just before harvest, that a person can tell the difference between them. But by that time their roots are so intertwined that the darnel can't be separated out without tearing the wheat out with them. Both, therefore, must be left to grow together until the time of harvest.

The wheat and this weed must eventually be separated, however, because the grain of darnel not only has a bitter and unpleasant taste, it is slightly poisonous. After a crop was cut and threshed, the grains were spread out on a large tray where hired servants would painstakingly pick out the darnel seeds one by one. Its size and shape are very similar to wheat, but instead of a golden brown color, it is slate-gray. That's what gives it away. And so laborious was this task of grain separation that according to Roman law it was actually a crime to sow this weed in the wheat field of an enemy.

People in Jesus' day understood all this when he told them this parable. So, not only would they have understood that the wheat represents good and the weed evil, but that **according to Jesus the two (good and evil) may be almost impossible to distinguish from each another.** That revelation would have deeply shocked them Jesus' original audience, just as it's shocking to us today.

For I would say that most people would claim that they could distinguish between good and evil, even between good and evil people. And many in the fundamentalist arm of any faith tradition take this one step further by becoming bound and determined to weed out those who they judge as evil, or an abomination, or an infidel. Most hate crimes can be tied directly to this phenomenon.

The gospel writer, Matthew, was obviously aware that the church in his day was involved in this same process of so-called "purification." By the way, the allegorical interpretation that follows Jesus parable is thought by modern biblical scholars to be of Matthew's construction, reflecting his (and his church's) understanding of Jesus' parable.

It's the age-old syndrome of trying to determine and judge who's in and who's out. It's obviously a game that Christianity has never gotten tired of playing. And while some play it more fiercely than others, I think there's an element of it in every church.

But wait a minute. Weren't a good many of us taught that as Christians we should actively try to eradicate evil and wickedness from our midst? As I'm sure everyone in this congregation today fully realizes, this attitude eventually and naturally leads to the trap of trying to determine whether other individuals, or categories of people, or even other countries, are "wheat" or a "weed."

It's like having a weed section and a wheat section right here in the sanctuary. The big question is who does the separating out?

Throughout history the Church continues to fall into this trap. Ever hear of the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, witch hunts, the endless list of "holy wars" used to justify the slaughter of those with differing religious and political beliefs?

**Even to this day the Church is trying to purify itself, either by excommunication, blatant exclusion, denial of full rights of membership and leadership, threats of eternal damnation in hell, and even by more subtle means like making certain persons feel unwanted and unwelcome. But the point of Jesus' parable is that it is not only basically impossible, but also disastrous to even try to achieve a "pure" church, let alone a "pure" world. For in the parable**

**Jesus states, "No, do not gather the weeds now, for in doing so you would uproot the wheat along with them."**

**I would go as far as stating that the Church's efforts to uproot and toss out those they believe are "unworthy" is part of the root cause (pardon the pun) of much of the conflict facing Christianity in our day and age. Harkening back to the Parable of the Sower, perhaps we should concern ourselves more with planting than with weeding.**

Now, that doesn't mean that we passively sit back and become victimized by evil, or become tolerant of sinful behavior. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary puts it wonderfully into perspective this way:

When the master in the parable forbids the servants to go and weed out the field, this is not to be interpreted as a call to passivity in the face of evil. It is not a divine command to ignore injustice in the world, violence in society, or wrong in the church. It is, rather, a realistic reminder that the servants do not finally have the *ability* to get rid of all the weeds and that sometimes attempts to pluck up weeds caused more harm than good. This is the way it is.

**So yes, the church needs constant reformation and positive action, yet it must avoid unrealistic purism.** We have been given an image of the church, therefore, in which both good and evil coexist, side-by-side, and (shockingly) are often impossible to tell apart. And any attempt to remove that which is evil, if indeed a correct determination can be made, proves disastrous to that which is good.

This parable can apply not only to the church but also to the world in which we live in today. So let me add a bit politics to religion for just a moment (something I usually try to avoid). And to help me with that, let me get on my soapbox [stand on box].

The United States, and the world for that matter, has discovered over the past 5 years that our "war on terrorism" is not the simple weeding out job we were assured it would be. Regardless of where you are on the political spectrum, or your personal stance on the war in Iraq, it is a fact that the efforts to pull out the weeds amidst the Iraqis has destroyed an enormous amount of the wheat.

**Speaking personally, I think I stand on firm theological ground in my belief that elected officials, regardless of their political ideology, should be held accountable for the destruction of and damage to the wheat in their efforts to root out the weeds.**

I want to change gears now, step off the soapbox (which is always nice to have one around when you need it), and approach this parable from yet a different angle. It's an interpretation that is more implicit than explicit, yet valid, nonetheless.

What if we look at the field in which both weeds and wheat grow together as not only as the **church** or the **world**, but also as **individual people**, like you and me? Is it not true that both good and evil also lives and grows within each of us? Only the arrogant and self-righteous would claim to be a weedless field.

As Paul Tillich wrote in his *Systematic Theology*, "Every life process has the ambiguity that the positive and negative elements are mixed in such a way a definitive separation of the negative from the positive is impossible: Life at every moment is ambiguous."

The famed psychologist Carl Jung would also most likely approved this particular interpretation of this parable. Jung explored the nature of the unconscious 'shadow' that lives in each soul.

**So we need to acknowledge that good and evil will always be intertwined within each of us.** Perfection is just not possible. At least not yet. Perhaps this parable (when it talks about the harvest) is telling us that when you and I go to spend eternity in loving the presence of God (whatever that may be like), all the evil weeds will be separated out of ourselves, leaving only the good grains of wheat within each of us.

This parable, then, frees us from the burden of having to "play God" and set things right all by ourselves. We must have faith that God will do that. **It is God who does the redeeming.** It is God who will separate out the weeds from the wheat, as God so chooses. **And it is my theological understanding that this applies to the good and evil with each individual, NOT the separating out of some for heaven and others for hell.**

**The ultimate victory of the kingdom of heaven, then, does not depend upon stainless purity in the church, in the world, or in us.**

This allows us to be patient, confident and hopeful, and implores us not to launch any fearful and destructive inquisitions, ripping everything apart out of a puritanical zeal to punish wrongdoers, or those we think we can determine as evil.

**So, let us be careful not to jump to quick judgments in labeling others as weeds. For at the moment, are we all not a mixture of both weeds and wheat?**

Amen.