

What About The Weeds?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

It's not our job to judge.

A sermon preached by
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Last Sunday I told you to be good dirt and to be a dandelion.¹ Be receptive to the Word, and you will experience the Kingdom of God. Spread the seeds of the Kingdom through your living witness in the world.

After my Sunday afternoon nap, I went out to work in the flowerbeds at my house, and I began destroying dandelions. I felt a little ironic, if not guilty, that I was uprooting what I had advocated only a few hours before. But they are weeds, and they are not welcome in my flowerbed. If I don't get them out by the roots, I will have dandelions everywhere.

Several times as I was weeding, I couldn't tell exactly where the weed was rooted. It was close to the good plant or intertwined in it. And I must confess, a couple of times I pulled up a weed, and the flower came with it—collateral damage. Suddenly I realized, I was living today's parable—a sermon illustration in my own back yard!

That was the genius of the parables of Jesus. They took something common to everyone's experience and drew out a profound truth. Immediately following the parable of the sower, Matthew says Jesus "*put before them another parable.*"² There was this farmer—maybe the same guy from the first story—who sowed good seed in his field. But during the night an enemy came and sowed weeds in his field. I don't know where the enemy went to buy weed seeds, but just go with it. After a while it became apparent that there were weeds growing in the wheat field. The farmhands came to the master and said, "Where did all these weeds come from? Didn't you sow good seed?" He replied, "An enemy did this." William Barclay said that this is still a threat made in developing countries: "I will sow bad seed in your field!"³

So the farmhands ask if they need to go pull up the weeds. But the farmer says, "No, that would just uproot the wheat. Let them grow together, and when the harvest comes we will separate the weeds from the wheat, gather the weeds into bundles and burn them, and gather the wheat into the barn." There you have it, a simple but profound little parable about patience, grace, and tolerance.

But like the parable of the sower, Matthew has to turn this parable into an allegory by adding an explanation. Several scholars I read say that the explanation is so different in tone and language and theme, that it must have been added to the parable by Matthew or one of his sources. Again, apart from the crowds, the disciples ask Jesus to explain the parable of the weeds of the field, which should be more properly called the parable of the patient farmer.

Like a floodgate opening, Jesus pours it out: *“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all the ... evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”* And the disciples thought, “Whoa! And it seemed like such a nice story.”

I agree that this explanation just seems out of character with the parable, probably added later, but it’s in the Scripture, so we had better pay attention. What are we to make of this parable turned allegory about the Kingdom of God?

The first thing we can say is that there are definitely weeds in the wheat. The crop is mixed. There is good and bad in everything. That’s the way of life; there are joys and sorrows, blessings and curses, good days and bad days, and you have to deal with both.

That’s the way of the church, too; the church is full of weeds and wheat, hypocrites and saints, dedicated disciples and casual observers. In 2007, David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons published a book that was highly disturbing to many people. It was called *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*.⁴ Based on interviews with thousands of young adults, they sought to understand how young people view the church. Many of them say they are “spiritual but not religious,” and an increasingly larger percentage of this generation is staying away from church. Why? According to the book, it is because young adults perceive the church—“organized religion”—as being hypocritical, judgmental, anti-homosexual, political, out of touch with contemporary culture, and only interested in “getting people saved.”

Information like that makes us want to react like the servants in the parable. “Master, should we just tear out the weeds?” Can we cleanse the church, solve our problems, restore our image, and get on about our real business, which is growing a new crop of disciples of Jesus?

No, we can’t. It doesn’t work that way. We can’t just remove all the sin and problems and controversies from the church. It’s a divinely-inspired but unfortunately human institution. We have to have patience and let the story run its course. We would love to run all the hypocritical and judgmental people out of the church, but that would be hypocritical and judgmental! It’s not our judgment to make. Removing the weeds from the wheat is God’s call, not ours. Dr. Clovis Chappell, a great Methodist preacher of an earlier generation, often said that everyone has a right to enter the kingdom of heaven, but no one has the right to shut anyone out.⁵

The simple fact is, we are kind of weedy ourselves. None of us are perfect, either, and we don’t know all we need to know to make the call on anyone’s status in the kingdom. We may look at someone and think, that’s a weed for sure. But we don’t know all the circumstances of that person’s life, and we don’t know what chapters have yet to be written in their story. Many times a weed in the present turns out to be wheat in the end.

So the second thing to say is that weeds and wheat have to co-exist until the harvest. However you want to construe the weeds and wheat—Christians and non-Christians, different Christian denominations, moral and immoral, us and them—we’re all in this together.

One of the parallels to our Dinner Church movement is called “Messy Church.” It’s an outreach event geared toward families with children where the kids can come and do art and crafts and generally make a mess while the family is learning a Bible lesson. That’s great, but all church is “messy.” Messy people, messy institution, messy world—the weeds cannot be

separated from the wheat just yet. So we co-exist. While we co-exist, there are two important things for the wheat (which we all aspire to be, right?) to do.

We need to grow. If the wheat slows down in its growth, the weeds will overtake it and choke it out. If a disciple of Jesus stops growing, stops practicing the means of grace, stops caring about his or her faith, then the weeds come on strong—sin, boredom, laziness, cynicism. And the faith that once was so strong just fades away. You have to keep growing.

And you have to be patient. Weeds are a fact of life. The church is always going to be made up of a bunch of humans, and they're going to act like it. The internal weeds in our hearts may be somewhat controlled, but they will not be eradicated as long as that heart is still beating. It would be so satisfying to just jerk out all those weeds, but in doing so, we would destroy the good wheat. If we ran all the sinners out of the church, the pews and the pulpits would all be empty. Just be patient and grow your crop so people can tell that you're wheat.

The third thing we can say about this parable is that there is a difference between wheat and weeds. They may grow together, but they are not the same plant. The Greek word translated "weed" in this text refers to a plant called bearded darnel. When darnel is growing, it looks like wheat. It even produces a head of grain like wheat. But it's not wheat. The grains are actually poisonous—not deadly, but sickening. If there is darnel in the wheat field, it has to be separated, or the crop is no good.

You don't have to be a Christian to be a good person. In fact, sometimes two people, one Christian and one not, can look very similar. (And sometimes the Christians don't look as good as some non-Christians.) But there is a difference. No matter how good, kind, upstanding, model citizen you might be, without faith in Christ, you will not inherit eternal life. The way we avoid judgment is by surrendering our lives to Jesus and accepting his grace as our Lord and Savior.

Don't be deceived; there will be judgment. The weeds will be separated, bundled and burned. Jesus says the same thing in the 15th chapter of John about the unfruitful branches on the vine; they will be gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.⁶ Six times in Matthew, Jesus says there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" for those who suffer the judgment of God. That may say more about Matthew than Jesus, because the other Gospels don't use that language. But as much as we like to talk about the grace and the patience of God, you can go the other way, the way of the weed, and it is heartbreaking.

I have had two families ask me in the last two weeks to pray for a family member with a terminal diagnosis. In both situations, the person with the illness has never professed a relationship with Jesus. The families are distraught because their loved one is facing death without the assurance of eternal life, and it is breaking their hearts.

But here's the miraculous thing. Weeds don't have to stay weeds. Weeds can become wheat. Anyone can repent of their sins, accept the grace of Christ, profess their faith in Jesus, and receive the gift of eternal life. Paul says, "*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!*"⁷ That's the great good news of this parable. Yes, there are weeds in the wheat. They have to co-exist for a while. They are, despite all appearances, very different. But in the end, the field, the crop, and the harvest belong to God. God will sort it out. God's got this; we can depend on that!

So let me close with your wheat farmer's to-do list. While you're waiting on the consummation of the Kingdom, here's your agenda:

Don't judge. Don't judge other people as weeds in your wheat field. It's not your job. You don't know what God knows. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For the judgment you give will be the judgment you get, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.*"⁸ He said more, but you get it. Don't judge.

Two, **take care of your own field.** You have your own weeds to deal with. Weed your own flowerbed; don't complain about your neighbor's weeds. Live your life with integrity, and grow your own relationship with the Lord.

Three, **love one another.** I believe Jesus said that was one of the two most important things: love the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.⁹ That includes the weeds. Love them anyway. Someday they may become wheat. Or you may realize when you love them that they were wheat all along.

Four, **share your faith.** Some weed is waiting to hear a word of good news from your lips. Dare to have that conversation. Do you know what they want to hear? I got an email this week from George Barna, who does all kinds of research on people and faith. His organization asked people without faith what they would look for in a conversation with a Christian. He wrote, "In our survey, responses are clear: The top thing people look for in a conversation with a Christian is that they 'listen without judgment.' People of no faith are also hoping for honesty about questions and doubts, and they don't want forced conclusions. The best learning environment, they express, is one marked by care and consideration."¹⁰ Have a talk with a weed. It might make an eternal difference in their life.

Dr. Ellsworth Kalas, the great Bible teacher, wrote about this parable in a book called *Parables From The Back Side*, and he tied it up in a bow with these words: "There are, indeed, weeds in the field of this world, of the church, and of our own lives. But that doesn't mean the cause of goodness is lost. [The words of the hymn 'This Is My Father's World' are] right in reminding us, 'that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.' Give time, the Great Landowner said, because in time there will be a reckoning, and we'll be able to separate the weeds from the grain. Meanwhile, you and I need to work at the task of goodness as earnestly and untiringly as the enemy works at the business of evil. ...Through it all, we dare not lose heart. For though the enemy is clever and fearsomely industrious, he cannot finally win. This is our Father's world, and if we work with him, we are on the winning side. The harvest will come, and it will be right."¹¹

Or, as Jesus said, "*Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*"

¹ William O. Reeves, "Dirt and Dandelions," sermon preached at First United Methodist Church, Fort Smith Arkansas, July 16, 2023.

² Matthew 13:24.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 74.

⁴ David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, 2007).

⁵ Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables From The Back Side* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 46.

⁶ John 15:6.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁸ Matthew 7:1.

⁹ Matthew 22:37-40.

¹⁰ <https://www.barna.com/research/no-faith-conversations/>.

¹¹ Kalas, 48f.