The Wheat and the Weeds

October 16, 2016

Matthew 13:24–30

This morning, we continue our study of the parables, and specifically here these parables utilizing the plant world to teach about the nature of the Kingdom of God. Last week, we noted that the Kingdom is like the one who plants seeds, then goes to bed, and when he wakes up notices growth in the plant. And the point was he could take no credit. He simply planted the seed. God is the One who made it grow. He gets the credit. Right?

Today, we take another parable using a similar word picture. It is found only in Matthew, Matthew 13. And here we have the advantage of having before us both the parable and Jesus’ interpretation of the parable which follows. So, the picture is pretty clear.

The parable utilizes the concept of weeds in a field. It notes that we plant crop seed, and yet at the same time that crop plant grows, weeds grow as well. They are mixed together. And at that stage in their development, it is not easy to distinguish between the good plants and the weeds. Right?

Now, in the days before weed killers, and with seed that is scattered rather than planted in rows, you have to wait until the plants mature to tell the difference between certain weeds and the good seed. Otherwise, you would pull out good plants thinking they were weeds. This makes sense. Right? But once it is harvest, it is easy to tell the difference. At harvest you cut down everything, and sort out the good from the weeds, burning the weeds and harvesting the good.

Okay, we understand the concept. Now let’s read the parable. Matthew 13 begins with the parable of the sower, which we will deal with in due time. Immediately after the explanation of the parable of the sower is our parable of the wheat and the weeds. We pick up the text at v.24. (24–30) Then we will read the explanation, which begins at v.36. (36-43)
Main point: There will be those among us, who look like us, but have been put there not by God, but by satan.

Now, my wording there was careful. There is debate among scholars whether this parable is talking about within the church, or churches among churches, or other religions. I am not trying here to settle the debate. Instead, I would like to use the principles listed rather than focus on the specific identity of such “weeds.”

And, as you’ve come to expect, Jesus here utilizes a parable because the message would be offensive to some. Indeed, this time it is easy to see. If you see yourself as part of the Kingdom and Jesus says you are not, you might be offended by that. So, listen carefully and determine the truth about yourself and about those with whom you associate. Weeds or crops?

I. The setting: the world is filled with all kinds of people. vv. 1-2

The setting for this parable is actually for this whole chapter of parables. We see it in the first verses. The description is pretty generic, but it is still telling.

v.1- That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.
The picture is that Jesus is on duty. He is teaching. He finds a spot where people can find Him and gather. He parks Himself there. And the people come.

v.2- Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.

The crowd grew so big that He had to spread them out along the shoreline while He got in a boat and backed up into the water so His voice would project and people would have been able to see Him.

There, that is the setting. But what do we read here? Well, Jesus’ whole point is going to revolve around the idea that not all of the people are alike. They may look alike right now. They may speak the same language and come from the same heritage, but they are as different as night and day. Yes, there is a crowd. But you must not think of the crowd as monolithic, as all being the same. In truth, that large crowd was made up of very different people, with very different perspectives, and very different purposes in the grand scheme of things. Every large crowd contains different people.

II. The parable: A man who cares about each of his plants will wait until harvest to identify and separate the weeds. vv.24-30

The principle here is having such concern for each and every good plant that he is willing to wait until the end to get rid of the weeds.
24 Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away.

Similar to the last parable, it starts with simply a man sowing seed in his field. This time, the description of the seed emphasizes that it is good. As you can already guess, there will probably be bad seed as well. But it starts with this same generic man sowing seed and going to sleep.

Next enter the villain, the enemy of the man. There is one who does not like the man, wants to harm the man, so he sows weed seeds among the good seed. And then he leaves. We have enough farmers and gardeners among us for this to be especially galling. Weeds are bad enough all on their own. But to hate someone so much as to intentionally sow weed seed among the good plants? This is a low blow. This is dastardly, disgusting. Who would do such a thing? There is no sense here that the man was negligent, as if he should have anticipated such a thing and stayed up all night as one would with sheep. No, he did his work and he rested. And while he rested his field was invaded by an enemy who sought to destroy the man and his crop.

26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

As the plants grew, it became increasingly clear that there were weeds in the field in addition to the crop. What do you do now? You can see that there are weeds in the field, sucking up the moisture, stealing the nutrients, competing for sunlight. We all know what it’s like to have a weedy garden or field. Right? We hate it.
27 “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

28 “‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

The man’s servants could see the weeds, but they did not understand how they got there. The weeds look almost as if they too were sown, broadcast in the field as the good seed. How did they get there?

But the man could instantly tell: this was the work of his enemy. It was clear. It was intentional. It was an attempt to destroy. The servants offer to go into the field and pull the weeds. And that is what we would do. Right? We spray, we weed, we cultivate. In our day, there are special chemicals associated with special plants designed to protect the good plants while killing all the weeds. Some prevent them from coming up, some kill only selective plants, some kill all plants except those which have been especially designed to withstand the chemicals used. Whatever the method, we know how important it is to kill the weeds. Weeds are not good for the crops. You have to get rid of them. Right?

29 “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

This is where the story takes a turn. This is where we see an unexpected response from the man. He refuses his servants’ offer to weed the field. Why? Because going out to pull the weeds will also mean accidental or incidental pulling of good plants as well. You can’t get all of the bad without risking some
of the good. It’s kind of like planting head rows at the end of the field. Doesn’t it bother you to run over some of the crop while turning around at the end of the field? And yet, that is what those rows are for. But it still bothers me anytime I knock over good plants trying to do my job.

So we see the perspective of the man in that he is willing to live with the weeds for the sake of even a few good plants that might get uprooted in the process. I imagine myself viewing the loss of good plants as the cost of doing business. But not this farmer. He valued, he cherished each and every one of his plants. They were all precious to him.

Instead, he instructs the servants to leave both plants alone and sort them out at harvest. I can’t help but notice the wording, “Let both grow together.” He did not call for separation, for field cleansing, but to let them share the same space, intertwine their roots, compete for the same resources. He was willing to lose a bit of potential yield for the sake of the life of all the good plants. Then at harvest they would take the time and effort to sort them out. Notice the weeds would be burned and the good seed harvested and protected in a barn. You must not miss the contrast between the burning of the weeds with the safety of the man’s barn.

There, this is the parable of the wheat and the weeds. In my mind, it is quite clear and simple. What stands out is:

1) the presence of the enemy. There is an evil intent in sending the weeds.

2) the delay in destroying the weeds. The weeds are allowed to grow, even in the closest proximity to the good plants.

3) the attitude of the man toward the good plants. He is unwilling to accept any losses of good plants in his field.

4) the contrast between the fate of the weeds and the fate of the seeds.
III. Application of the parable: Judgment will show who is God’s chosen and those of God’s enemy. vv. 36-43

As I’ve already mentioned, this parable actually includes text giving Jesus’ explanation of the parable. And from His explanation, we can see the pointed message it delivers. In every “large crowd” there are some, who look at first glance like they belong to God but in the end will be burned up in the fires of judgment. They look like good plants, but they are just weeds planted by satan himself.

36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

In between these two text are the parables we will cover next week, the mustard seed and the yeast. So Jesus gives three parables, and then later the disciples ask for an explanation of this one. Notice the crowds have left and they are in private. Now He can speak openly.

37 He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man.

In essence, Jesus is taking the same approach we are. He gives the parable and then identifies the characters in the story. Some of them, He here does not identify, like the servants (unless they are also the harvesters). But He starts with the sower. The sower is Himself, using the eschatological title referenced in the Old Testament, “Son of Man.” In other words, He is the man here, but one whose coming was a pivotal event in human history.
38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,

The field is the world, the realm of people. I notice it is not more specific than that, like “the Church,” or “the religious people”. It is the broadest term possible, the world. Then we see that the good seed are the sons of the Kingdom, or the people of God, or the people under the lordship of the Messiah. We might call them, “Jesus followers.” And then, the weeds are the sons of the devil, the enemy, the evil one here. So, there is this mixture of the people of the kingdom and the people of the enemy. They are sharing the same space, competing for the same resources, growing side by side. The good and the bad are all mixed together into one “large crowd.”

39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

The evil one is then identified as the devil himself. And the harvest, as we would expect, is the judgment that comes at the end of the age, or the culmination of history. Then the harvesters are His angels. They will do the work of sorting the good from the weeds.

40 “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.

Now Jesus puts them together to make His point. Judgment will be the time when the weeds and wheat are sorted out. The weeds will burn, the wheat will be protected in barns. In other words, until that point, it will seem as though
God does not distinguish between His own and the imposters. But the truth is that He is simply delaying out of love for His own, not wanting that any should perish in the process. But we must know that such a time of sorting and punishing and collecting and preserving WILL happen. It may not look like it now, but in the end it WILL happen.

41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

He has already said it, but He repeats with even more specificity. Jesus will send out His angels, who will weed out the evil ones, who themselves cause others to sin (this rubbing up against the good plants). They will used to fire the furnace. They will be punished. They will regret their rebellion. Now remember, they will start out looking like the wheat. They will be indistinguishable from the wheat until later on. But they will be destroyed.

And on the other side, these same angels will collect the Lord's own, who will glow, who will be honored in this fulfilled, completed Kingdom of God. The contrast could not be more clear nor more stark. Judgment is coming, and it will be revealing, and it will have consequences.

Then we notice the tag, “He who has ears, let him hear.” In other words, take notice, don’t miss what I’ve just said. There’s more here than meets the eye. So, what is the more? Well, we go back to the setting and remember that it is a large crowd. And the message to them is that not all of the crowd are Jesus’ own. They may all look like followers of Jesus. Certainly they are literally following Him around. But that doesn’t mean they are His followers. Some are weeds planted by the enemy. Some are evil doers, some are instigators of evil.
Some lead God's people astray. Yes, they all look the same. Yes they all look like one group. But they are not all the same. It is a mixed multitude.

Okay, what do we do with this? Well, as I again said at the outset, there is a debate about whether this is talking about weeds out in the world, or weeds in the church. And my answer to that is, "Yes!" I think it is intentionally vague. I think there are fakes, imposters, weeds everywhere, in every "large crowd." There are phony religions, there are imposter preachers, there are enemy plants within the church. It is always a mixture. In other words, just because you are here doesn't mean you are one of Jesus' followers. You might just be part of the larger crowd. Or, just because there is a steeple and a cross doesn't mean it leads people to follow Jesus. Or just because they look like us doesn't mean they are one with us. Indeed, judgment will show us ultimately. But the opposite is true as well. There are SOME true believers in many false groups.

But why doesn't God get rid of them, punish them now for their role? For the very reason mentioned here. Doing so would damage some of His own. And He values each and every one of His own. He is patient with evil for the sake of His own. I think that is an important truth to hold onto. Don't you?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will not assume we know where everyone stands with Jesus.

2) We will not associate being in the crowd with being a believer.
3) We will use discernment so we don’t get caught up in the deception of the enemy.

4) We will value each and every believer, even when they seem to be choked out by weeds.

5) We will remember that judgment is coming and ally ourselves accordingly.