

Good morning friends and welcome back to our summer series on the Parables of Jesus. It is great to be here this morning with you all. This has been one of those miserable weeks where we all get to swelter and suffer together and give thanks to God for the invention of air conditioning. Before we jump into our parable this morning, I want to ask you all to be praying for our Croatia Team. Doug sent me this picture of the team on Wednesday. They will be in Croatia for the next week or so working at a youth camp, teaching English lessons, serving alongside Croatian students and hopefully sharing the truth a love of Jesus. Be praying for them, that God will use them and bless them and give them a ton of energy and opportunities to share the gospel and the love of Jesus. And pray for them to return home safely.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Phil kicked off our series in the parables and he explained the definition and purpose of a parable. He quoted Dr. Snodgrass who said "A parable is an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade." Parables point us towards action. Does this sound familiar? Another way to say it is a parable uses everyday life, relationships, activities and events to teach important spiritual lessons.

There is something else about a parable that makes them exceptional teaching tools. A good parable will leave you asking questions and seeking the true meaning. In other words, a parable should leave you wanting for more, looking for a deeper understanding. And for a parable to be effective, the hearer has to be hungry for the truth and tender hearted enough to wrestle with the lesson. I think this is why most of the parables of Jesus have no explanation. We are supposed to chew on it, process it, think about it, ponder it and search for the meaning. Jesus was a master teacher, and parables were a powerful tool he used to get people to think outside the box and ponder spiritual things.

This morning our parable is found in Matthew 13. It is probably familiar to you. It is traditionally called the parable of the wheat and the tares. The ESV titled it the parable of the weeds. Mathew chapter 13 is full of parables. We are actually going to read three parables this morning because they are closely related and arranged together.

Beginning in Verse 24, lets read all the way through verse 33. (READ TEXT)

You probably noticed the opening phrase of each of these parables. The Kingdom of Heaven is like. . . and then the parable explains an aspect of the kingdom of heaven. All of the parables in chapter 13 are focused on the kingdom of heaven. So let's talk about what it is for a moment before we unpack this parable and try to answer a few questions about the kingdom of heaven. What is the Kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God as Mark and Luke like to say it)? When or where is the kingdom? How do we fit into the kingdom? What is the relationship between Christ and kingdom? All of these are important to understanding this parable.

The kingdom of heaven is the place where God's rule and authority is present. You might be saying to your-self, now hold on, isn't God the God of the universe? Doesn't he own everything? Isn't he the ultimate authority? Where could there be that God isn't present and sovereign? Those are legitimate questions. So let me say it is a little differently. The kingdom of God is a declaration of God's sovereign reign and rule in the hearts of people, and in the structures of society where they dwell. So in this way, there are places where God is not sovereign, because the people have rejected his sovereignty and have not submitted themselves to his reign and rule. There are many places in this world and even in our own community where God is rejected. His authority is rejected and his grace and mercy are unwanted.

So when Jesus or John the Baptist declared that the Kingdom of God is at hand or has arrived, they were declaring that God's will, his sovereignty

and his plan were taking place. His plan has begun. However, to the frustration of many of Jesus' followers, the Kingdom was not going to be a sudden and complete overthrow of evil. Instead it would be a slow growth process with very small beginnings, and often imperceptible development. In this way, The Kingdom of God is both a now and not yet reality. It is a **now** reality because the Kingdom began with Jesus and his work on the cross. The Kingdom is visible and present in the lives of those who trust and follow Jesus. We see the evidence of the Kingdom of heaven at work in transforming peoples lives, in miracles, in victories large and small. The gospel has been spreading and the church growing for generations. It is a **not yet** reality because we are still waiting for the kingdom to be complete, for God's reign and rule to extend over all the nations. For all people to recognize God's authority and his love and grace. So we are left in the tension of the now and not yet kingdom of heaven. We can see its effects, we can feel the impact of God's working, and yet there is still so much trouble and hardship and evil in the world around us.

I was trying to think of other seasons in life where we feel the now and not yet tension. That sense that things are happening, progress is happening, we are moving forward just not quite there yet. I think of things like being engaged to be married. Huge step towards commitment, just now quite there yet. When you are expecting a baby. Pregnant, excited, the baby is coming, then the longest 9 months of waiting. Being in escrow on a house. The longest 30 days of my life is spent in escrow. That last year before retirement. So close, almost there but not quite yet. Sitting in church on a Sunday morning when it's going to be 105 degrees and you are trying to stay awake. Almost there.

The kingdom of heaven is a now and not yet reality and we get to live in that tension between.

Now let's unpack this parable and talk about what it teaches us about the kingdom of heaven.

This story of a land owner with servants planting wheat in the field would have been normal, everyday life stuff for the Jews. In fact, for millions of farmers around the world, this is just part of life. Even the matter of agricultural sabotage would have been common enough for people to understand it. This kind of sabotage was evidently common enough that the Romans had laws against it. Having your field sabotaged with weeds or eaten by a herd of sheep or cattle was a big problem and was a punishable offense.

There are particular weeds or plants that look very similar to wheat when they are small shoots. Their leaves are similar enough in size and shape that it's hard to tell the difference when they are small, and by the time they are distinguishable their roots have intertwined with the wheat so if you pull up one, you risk pulling the other.

So the master tells the workers to wait until the day of harvest, then separate the wheat from the weeds. The weeds are to be gathered and burned, the wheat gathered into the storehouse.

There are traditionally three interpretations of this parable. The first and most prominent historically argues that Jesus is talking about the Church. The wheat are the believers, and the weeds are the unbelievers who look like believers within the church but aren't really true Christians. Because it is so hard to tell the difference between false and true, we are to simply carry on with the work of the church and trust that God will sort it all out in the end. This was popular for centuries.

A second interpretation holds that the parable is an allegory for the struggle that takes place in the hearts of all believers. Within each of us is a struggle of good against evil, and as we grow and are sanctified by the Spirit, we overcome the evil with good. Ultimately at the day of judgment, God will strip away the evil from us and welcome us into eternity free from sin or guilt.

There is a third option and I think it is the one that Jesus intended. Fortunately this parable is one of just three parables where Jesus explains the meaning. **Let's read Verses 36-43.**

After telling the parable to the gathered crowd outside, Jesus took his friends aside, into a house, and explained to them the meaning of the parable. This wasn't public knowledge. And he used the parable to answer a few really important questions. Why was there still evil in the world if the Kingdom of God was at hand? Why do bad things still happen? When will things be made right?

The answer in the parable is not easy. The kingdom of God will grow, like a tiny mustard seed it will grow slowly and steadily until it is the largest of the garden plants, like a tree that the birds can rest on. The kingdom of heaven will spread, imperceptibly, like a tiny bit of sourdough mixed into a batch of flour. You can't see it, but all of a sudden, the whole dough is leavened. The Kingdom will be planted in the world, all across the world, with the Gospel. Satan will work against it, and God's people will sprout and grow side by side with unbelievers. Unhealthy, broken people are allowed to exist side by side with God's people until the final harvest.

Why is this? Why is evil and brokenness allowed to continue under God's reign and rule? Firstly because God ordained it. I don't like that answer very much but it's still true. God is not the source of evil or the cause of evil. In fact it is impossible for God to cause or participate in any evil deed. However, God allows evil to exist. He has granted his created beings, both angels and humans the freedom to make their own choices, and as you know, Humans have chosen evil. So God has ordained that his kingdom will exist side by side with the evil and brokenness in the world for a set amount of time.

But secondly, because God is patient and long suffering. God has postponed the harvest of the earth, He has postponed his judgment so that more people can come to his saving grace and enter into his kingdom. Now that is an answer I like. How many of us are grateful that

God did not judge the earth before we repented of our sins and turned to him? I know I am.

When the time of the harvest does come, justice will be carried out perfectly. All causes of sin and all law breakers will be gathered and burned in the furnace. This is the final judgment. I wrestle with this truth. While I celebrate the end of evil and the destruction of sin and lawlessness I also realize that we are talking about lost people who will be judged and condemned and that grieves me. The law breakers, unbelievers will be in the fiery furnace, a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. I long for justice on earth, but I don't revel in the idea of eternal suffering for those who live in rebellion against God's kingdom reign.

Thank God for his grace and mercy. We have been spared of God's condemnation and judgment by the blood of Jesus, amen? We were once like the weeds, but because of God's great love for us, he redeemed us. Thank God for his patience, there is still time for others to respond to the gospel and the offer of salvation before the great day of the harvest.

On that day, the righteous will also be gathered, not for destruction but for glory, where they will shine like stars in the kingdom of heaven. That's the part we get to look forward to.

While this parable is all about God's overarching plan for his kingdom, there are still some important things for us to do while we wait for the harvest.

1. Believers are to grow and bear fruit.

The best way to know if you are wheat or weeds is the fruit that you produce. In John 15:5 Jesus says, I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me

you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

You will know a tree by its fruit. A good tree bears good fruit, a bad tree bears bad fruit. Jesus said Abide in me and I will abide in you and you will bear much fruit.

Our primary job is to abide in Jesus and grow spiritual fruit. This does not mean that we run out and do good things to earn our salvation. This means walking closely with Jesus and being filled with the Spirit and following the lordship and leadership of Jesus as you live your life. Taking every opportunity to do what is good out of the overflow of God's love for you and the grace and mercy that has been poured out on you.

2. Remember that Jesus is the Lord of the Harvest, and we are not. When John the Baptist spoke of Jesus coming in Matthew 3:11-12 he said " I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Sometimes we get caught up in trying to figure out who are the wheat and who are the weeds. Or we think we should do the work of separating the wheat from the weeds. Or we think we should be out ridding the church of evil unbelievers, keeping the church pure, destroying evil in the world. While there are plenty of things we should be doing to fight injustice in society and to help people who are struggling, we have to keep our perspective. Our job is to grow and bear fruit. Jesus will do the judging.

3. We are to trust in God's timing.

He alone knows the day of the Harvest. Right now, as we watch the news, especially what is happening in Israel and the Middle east it is so easy to get twisted up about the end of days. We have one hand on the tv remote and the other on our Bible and we are desperate to make sense of what is going on. We want to know. But friends, no amount of worry or anxiety will change when the day of the harvest will come.

Our job is to wait patiently, and bear fruit. The kingdom of heaven began with Jesus but here we are 2000 years later and we are still waiting. The not yet part seems super long to me. In the Revelation 22, Jesus said "Behold I am coming soon." Well, I think Jesus has a different definition of "soon" than I have. When Jesus returns it will be undeniable and visible for all. Until then, don't worry about it. We will know when we know.

4. There is still time to love people with the good news of Jesus. Until the day of the harvest, there is still time. I'm all for missions and sending teams across the globe, but you don't have to go to Croatia to find someone who needs the good news. So let's go share the gospel with the people in our circle, our family, our neighbors, our coworkers, perfect strangers even. We just might be the tool the God intends to use to draw someone into his grace and forgiveness before the day of harvest.