

“What to do With the Weeds”

Matthew 13:24-43

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When I was growing up, weeding the garden was one of my least favorite activities. It was often hot outside and my back hurt from bending over. I also thought it was monotonous work, so often I didn't pay careful attention to what I was doing. And sure enough, I would sometimes pull a bean or pea or carrot along with the weeds. My mom maybe thought I did that on purpose so she would decide to do the job herself, but really, I was just careless.

That simple mistake of confusing a weed with the plant you want to grow is the basis of the parable Jesus tells in our text today. We are again in Matthew 13 and will explore verses 24-30 and then verses 36-43. This little story about a very ordinary part of life, contains some important spiritual truths that we, as Christians, need to hear and heed. Let's pause and pray the Lord would enable us to understand and apply His Word today.

The ESV Bible call this “the Parable of the Weeds.” **Matthew 13:24-26** He (Jesus) put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.

People have done nasty things to their neighbors for a long time. What that enemy planted was likely “bearded darnel” which looks very much like wheat when the plants are young. However, when the heads of grain appear on the wheat, it becomes clear which plant is which.

**Matthew 13:27-30** And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your fields? How then does it have weeds?” He said to them, “An enemy has done this.” So the servants said to him, “Then do you want us to go and pull them up?” But he said, “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until

**the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers. ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”**

That's the story. What does it mean? Fortunately for us, Jesus' disciples asked that question, and in verse 37-43 we have Jesus' explanation of the parable. He says, **Matthew 13:37** **The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.** “The Son of man” is the title for the Messiah that Jesus claims for himself. Jesus plants the seed. **Matthew 13:38** **The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one.** The sons of the kingdom are believers in Jesus, Christians. The sons of the evil one are all those who reject Jesus as Lord. **Matthew 13:39** **and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.** This is the cast of characters.

**Matthew 13:40** **Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.** The focus of Jesus' story is the end of the age, the end of history, when Jesus returns to earth. The Bible says we don't know when this will occur. **Acts 1:7** **It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.** Jesus could return tomorrow or a thousand years from now. Only God knows.

But Jesus will certainly return and then, **Matthew 13:41** **The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers,** that is Jesus' way of referring to those who reject Him, **Matthew 13:42** **and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** This is the destination of those who reject Jesus.

It seems clear He is talking about hell. I am not sure this is a literal description, but it is the picture Jesus paints almost every time He speaks of the punishment of the unbelievers. **Matthew 13:43** **Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ear, let him hear.** The point is that only in

the end, when this spiritual harvest occurs, will we know for sure who are the weeds and who are the wheat.

That, folks, is the story Jesus tells. Obviously, this text is a warning to those who don't trust and follow Jesus. Such an individual may succeed in fooling other people. Everyone may think he/she is a wonderful person, even a wonderful Christian. But God can never be fooled. In the end it will become clear who is truly trusting in Jesus and who is just playing a religious game. That is a very solemn warning to anyone here who is not really a believer in Jesus Christ.

Another important lesson is this: It is not always easy to distinguish between those who are believers and those who are not. Last week's sermon on the parable of the soil noted that not all who profess to be Christians necessarily are. Some people seem sincere in their belief and excited about Jesus, but their faith proves to be very temporary.

One of the things Jesus does in this parable is remind us that we, as human beings, should not be going around deciding who are the true Christians and who are the counterfeits. *That is not our job.* If we try to do that, we may do some real damage. We have to be willing to let God sort things out in the end. This is an important truth we will come back to a bit later, but I want the first respond to a couple of mistakes people make in understanding this parable.

First, the Lord is not prohibiting us from making moral judgements. Some folks say that because it can be difficult to tell the difference between a true Christian and someone who is not, we must never judge anyone, no matter what their words or actions.

We should see every person on the planet as a Christian brother or sister, even if they call themselves Muslims, Hindus, or atheists. These people say being judgmental is the number one vice. Their favorite Bible verse is not John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son..." But Matthew 7:1 "Judge not, lest you be judged."

But don't misinterpret that verse. I think Jesus primarily has in mind that we don't fall into the

trap of judging the motives of another person. That doesn't mean, however, that we cannot evaluate someone's words or actions. For example, if someone says, "I am a Christian, but I don't believe Jesus was God, just an ordinary man." Is it judgmental or wrong to say this individual is *not* really a Christian?

No. By his own words he has admitted he is not truly a believer in Jesus Christ. Likewise, I don't believe Jesus prohibits us from considering someone's actions. Let's say a Chisholm Baptist Sunday School teacher gets arrested and convicted for drunk driving. Now, I can use this example because I am 99% sure that will not happen. But if it did, it would be appropriate for me to go to him/her and say, "I don't think you should be teaching Sunday School right now. Your actions reveal you have a problem that needs to be dealt with before you are ready to serve in this way."

I hope you are getting my point. Jesus' parable, which teaches that it is not always easy to distinguish who are genuine Christians and who are not, doesn't mean we have to be morally paralyzed. We still should be able to declare that some ideas are true, while others are false, that certain actions are right and others are wrong. We can do that not on the basis of our opinions or preferences, but rather on the basis of what God has taught us in His Word.

Sometimes I hear, "Who are you to say the homosexual lifestyle is sinful, and that a promiscuous heterosexual lifestyle is sinful, not because they go against my personal preferences, but because the Bible tells us that they are wrong." Again, we are talking about our opinions. We are not being judgmental. We are simply repeating what the Bible teaches. And friends, if that doesn't make sense to you, we should chat.

Now, we must remember that Jesus also tells us we are to love our neighbor. If we don't think that includes someone involved in sexual sin, we better read the Bible more carefully. Jesus says we are to love even our enemies. Now, loving someone may include telling that person the Bible says what he/she is doing is wrong, but that is very different from hating someone.

Friends, we should not be judgmental, but we should tell the truth to those around us. I need to do that, and you need to do that. When the Bible says a certain belief is false, any teaching that reflects that belief is also wrong.

By telling the parable of the weeds, Jesus is not encouraging us to become moral relativists who think all ideas or lifestyle choices are equal. The wheat is still wheat, and the weeds are still weeds. We should still call sin, sin and false teachings false. To think this parable teaches we should not do this, is to misunderstand what Jesus is saying.

Second, the Lord is not teaching that the church should include those who are not Christians. Augustin, the great Christian teacher in North Africa in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, said the parable of the weeds means the church will always be made up of true believers and those who are not. Thus, he said, we should be content with that and not try to change it.

In his day, a group known as the Donatists were very concerned about the purity of the church. They insisted that anyone who wavered at all in the face of persecution be removed from the congregation. No matter what someone said now, if at one time he had denied Jesus, his profession of faith could not be trusted and therefore he should not be part of the church.

But the Donatist wanted to exclude not just those who had explicitly denied Jesus, but also anyone who had dealt with the persecution in a different way than the Donatists thought was right. But should those who had fled to a different community, rather than be killed for their faith, really be expelled from the church?

In recent decades churches in Russia and former communist countries faced a similar dilemma. What about folks who stopped going to church during the communist repression and persecution? When political freedom was reestablished, should those people have been welcomed back into the fellowship? What did they need to do to prove that their faith was genuine? Those were not easy questions.

Anyway, Augustin saw that in their zeal to clean up the church, the Donatists were taking some folks who were true Christians and throwing them

in a spiritual garbage dump. Thus, he argued that we need to let the church consist of wheat and weeds, of true believers and counterfeits, until the end when God, who alone can see human hearts, will sort things out.

He said it was not only foolish, but wrong to attempt to purify the church and remove those who don't appear to be genuine Christians. Well, I understand Augustin's concern, but I think on this point, this brilliant and godly man was wrong.

Why? Well, there are a number of texts in the New Testament that make it clear Christians ought to distinguish between those who truly follow Jesus and those who don't. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul writes that it is proper for the Christians there to judge within the church and expel someone from their group who is living an immoral lifestyle. 2 Peter and Jude are two books where the Lord calls us to identify false Christians and reject their teaching. The Bible does call us to distinguish between wheat and weeds at certain times.

And there can be real problems when only a minority of members in a congregation are true followers of Jesus. I think of the Anglican church Charles Simeon pastored in Cambridge England a couple hundred years ago. Most of the folks in that congregation didn't like the fact Simeon insisted on preaching from the Bible. They found that to be too convicting. This was during the time when people rented church pews. Because Simeon's opponents were angry with him, they stopped coming to church to hear him, and they bought up all the pews in the church so anyone who wanted to listen to Simeon preach would have to stand in the back of the sanctuary.

Charles Simeon hung in there though. When his opponents realized they couldn't drive him from the pulpit, they gave up and stopped paying for the pews. He ended up serving as the pastor of that church for 54 years, from 1782-1836. This is an example of the type of problem that can develop when a large portion of the members of a congregation are not genuine Christians.

Now, everyone, no matter who they are, what they have done, or what they believe, is welcome to attend this church, (as long as they are not intending to disrupt this gathering). But to become a *member* of Chisholm Baptist Church an

individual ought to give some evidence of being a believer in Jesus Christ.

If someone says, "I believe Jesus was a good man, but I don't think He was the Son of God," I would say, "You are not quite ready to be a member of Chisholm Baptist." If someone is in an adulterous affair, I would probably say, "I am sorry, but you cannot become a member of our church at this time because what you are doing contradicts your claim to want to follow Jesus."

Would I be judgmental in saying that? I don't think so. The parable of the weeds does not mean the church should be made up of both believers and unbelievers, only that it often is.

Okay, those are two misapplications, but what does this parable of the weeds mean for us? Well, the big lesson is that we must be very careful in judging others. Even though we ought to make moral judgments, even though we want church member to be truly Christians, we need to be careful, very careful how we judge other people.

Here are some comments I hear coming from different Christians I know and even sometime from my own lips: "I don't think he is a very committed Christian. He misses church a lot of Sunday mornings." Or "I know everyone thinks they are great Christians, but I heard they hardly gave any money to the church last year, even though they bought that new car." Or "She's not really serious about her faith. She listens to the oldies radio station instead of the Christian station."

Folks, listen carefully. I think it is good to go to church every Sunday, to generously give money to the church, and to listen to the Christian radio station. What is wrong, what is very judgmental, is when we start accusing folks who don't do those things of not being committed in their faith, or maybe of not even really being a Christian.

Remember, we cannot see inside people's spiritual hearts. Only God can do that. I often don't know why someone misses church on Sunday mornings, why someone doesn't give much money to the church, or why someone likes to read romantic novels instead of the Bible. Yes, if I talk to these individuals and listen to their reasons, maybe I can make an accurate

evaluation. But by just looking at someone, I cannot tell what their motives are.

And remember, motives matter. They matter a lot. Why someone does or does not do something is very important. A woman who has the oldies radio station on because that is what her husband wants to listen to, is probably more godly than the woman who puts on the Christian station just to irritate her husband. We need to be very careful that we don't misjudge others.

Over the years, I have seen judgmental attitudes do great damage in numerous churches. Some of you may have experienced that firsthand. The church I attended when I was in college was a magnificent congregation. But, a few years later a new pastor came in. He quickly developed a very loyal following from a small group of people in the church. Then the pastor tried to institute changes which generated opposition from the majority of the congregation. These types of things happen in churches.

But then the pastor declared that those who opposed his ministry were not really following the Lord and maybe were not even really Christians.

One of my friends, who had been a faithful follower of Jesus for years, decided she didn't want to be part of a Bible study that the pastor was leading. She was told, "Your refusal to be part of the study indicates you have an unteachable spirit. I wonder if you are really a Christian." In the end, she and many of the people who didn't want to follow that pastor left the church.

Many, many people are wounded deeply because of what happens in churches like this and their souls can carry those scars for years. The church should not be like that. Labeling those who disagree with us about how something should be done in the church as "probably not really a Christian" is very dangerous. It is very judgmental. This is one of the things the Lord is warning us about through this parable.

Folks, I think today is a good time to remind ourselves that God has called us here together as a congregation, not to judge each other, but to serve one another. As I have said, that doesn't mean we put on moral blinders and refuse to acknowledge sin and error. But instead of

constantly trying to analyze each other's motives, instead of arguing about who is more spiritual, we need to devote ourselves to encouraging and helping each other. Instead of judging, we need to focus on serving.

Maybe there are even folks in this room today you are skeptical about. You question their motives. You wonder if they are really sincere in their expressions of faith in the Lord and love toward others. My assignment for you today is this" Ask the Lord to help you stop asking those questions. Unless you are in a situation that requires you to make some type of judgment, I encourage you to be content letting God judge that person's heart.

Instead ask the Lord to show you a way that you might help that other person follow Jesus more closely. Oh, being a judge may seem a lot more fun than being a servant. But remember what Jesus said, "If you want to be great in God's kingdom, learn to be the servant of all."