

## Pulling Weeds

Matthew 13:24-43

January 26, 2020

In life, there are those milestone moments when we realize we're not as young as we used to be. This week I had one of those moments when I went in for a routine eye exam. After reciting the smallest line of letters I could read, and working through a series of preferred lenses, I learned that my prescription had changed. That's when I heard the "B" word. I was told it was time for bifocals.

While I don't welcome this milestone, I do welcome the upgraded lenses. Better glasses means better vision. And better vision provides a clearer perspective. When our eyes don't work the way they were made to, we need help to see things the way we ought to. Jesus' parables function a lot like a new pair of glasses. They help us see things from a kingdom perspective.

We are returning to Matthew chapter 13, picking up where Pastor Jerry left off two Sundays ago when we started this sermon series. In the first part of the chapter, we looked at *The Parable of the Sower*, also known as *The Parable of the Soils*. There we were given a picture of how people receive the message of the kingdom. Those who hear and understand it bear much fruit. Others merely hear the word but it never takes root in them. This lack of fruit reveals not a deficiency in the word that is sown, but a hard-heartedness in the one unwilling to listen. When questioned by his disciples why he taught this way, Jesus said,

This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand" (Mt. 13:13, NIV).

According to Jesus, one of the purposes of speaking in parables is that they confirm the hard-heartedness of those who resist the message of the kingdom. However, Jesus' parables have a different result when heard by those with hearts ready to receive his word. Jesus said to his disciples,

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it (Mt. 13:16-17, NIV).

In fact, Matthew notes in verses 34 and 35 that Jesus' consistent use of parables is the fulfillment of something anticipated in the Old Testament. Matthew says,

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world” (Mt. 13:34-35, NIV).

For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, Jesus’ parables are designed to unveil truths about the kingdom. These scriptural truths were not fully understood until the kingdom of heaven had dawned with the arrival of Jesus Christ. Much like a new pair of glasses, Jesus’ parables help us to see the truth of his kingdom from a new perspective. And oh do we need that kingdom perspective as we turn to the second of Jesus’ parables in Matthew 13.

Our passage is commonly referred to as *The Parable of the Weeds* or *The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares*. Jesus was a master at using everyday experiences to illustrate spiritual truth. His original hearers were to imagine an act of agricultural sabotage.

A farmer anticipates a crop of wheat only to discover that someone had stealthfully sown weeds throughout his field. These weeds went undetected until late in the growing season when the wheat began to bear its grain. But by then the root systems of both wheat and weeds were so intertwined that any attempt to separate the two would only result in damaging the crop.

This parable deals with some weighty topics: evil, the devil, and the fires of hell. Now, I thought for a moment about using that as my sermon title—*Evil, the Devil, and the Fires of Hell*—but decided that might be a little too aggressive.

As we turn our attention to verse 36, you’ll notice that there is both a change in venue and a change of audience:

Then he [Jesus] 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 (v. 36).

In this private setting, Jesus unpacks the meaning of this parable for his disciples. Jesus’ explanation begins in verse 37:

The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 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. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear (Mt. 13:37-43, NIV).

So what does this first-century parable about wheat and weeds say to twenty-first-century people? First, Jesus' parable provides us with a kingdom perspective on the problem of evil.

The first time I heard the phrase "the problem of evil" was in a college philosophy class. For centuries, philosophers have wrestled with the logical consistency between three simple premises:

- 1) God is good
- 2) God is all-powerful
- 3) Evil exists

The debate goes something like this: if God is good, and if God is all-powerful, then He has both the ability and the will to eliminate evil from our world. But, evil exists in our world. Therefore, either God doesn't eliminate evil because He's not good, or God cannot eliminate evil because He's not all-powerful.

All of us know that the problem of evil is more than a philosophical debate. Evil is a genuine part of our shared human experience. Why does the master allow weeds to flourish alongside the wheat? Where is God when we hear about mass shootings, human trafficking, and cases of child abuse? How are we to understand the tragic loss of life brought about by natural disasters? What sense are we to make of birth defects, genetic disorders, and terminal illness?

I don't want to give an overly simplistic answer to our experience of suffering. But I wholly believe that it is only through the lens of the kingdom of heaven that we can hope to have perspective on the problem of evil. How else could Jesus' own disciples have made sense of the greatest tragedy in human history, the crucifixion of Jesus?

Did you notice that in verse 37, the sower is identified as "the Son of Man"? There are a number of ways that Jesus could have referred to himself, but what's the significance of the title "Son of Man," especially in Matthew's Gospel?

Jesus referred to himself many times as “the Son of Man,” but consider the very next occurrence of this title in Matthew’s Gospel. It shows up in chapter 16 where Matthew tells us,

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (Mt. 16:13-23, NIV)

Jesus revealed to his disciples that he was heading to the cross, and Peter immediately wanted to pull weeds and prevent this tragedy. But pulling weeds and preventing Jesus’ death was not part of the master’s plan. Peter lacked the perspective of the kingdom that alone could make sense of Jesus’ death on a cross.

Folks, the Master is well aware of the presence of weeds among the wheat. And at times, Christ mercifully and miraculously untangles the roots so that some weeds are pulled out and the wheat can continue to grow undisturbed. And when he does this, we are graciously given a foretaste of what the kingdom of heaven will be like once it has fully arrived. But it is not yet time for harvest. And until that day comes, we are to hold

on to hope in Christ, the one who promised to be with his people “always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20).

Second, Jesus’ parable provides us with a kingdom perspective on an old enemy. When the servants came and reported that there were weeds in their master’s field, the farmer immediately knew the source of the sabotage. He said, in verse 28,

“An enemy did this” (v. 28).

Jesus further identified the enemy in verse 39 as the devil.

In the introduction to his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis wisely says,

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you’re someone who sees the devil as some fictional boogeyman that ancient peoples invented to give a face to the presence of evil in our world. Or maybe you’re someone who is paralyzed with worry that there’s a demon hiding around every corner. I agree with Lewis that we should take care to neither rest in our overconfidence or cower in our overestimation of the powers of darkness.

When we looked at *The Parable of the Sower* two Sundays ago, we saw the devil show his ugly face in that story too. Remember that Jesus said,

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path (Mt. 13:19, NIV).

This has been the devil’s strategy from day one. From the very beginning, Satan has been seeking ways to sabotage the master’s field by attempting to undermine the trustworthiness of God and His word. When we meet the devil for the first time in Scripture we read,

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<sup>1</sup> The Screwtape Letters, C. S. Lewis

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1, NIV).

Why does Satan pursue this strategy? Because it tends to work. When we sin, our rebellious hearts are denying that God’s ways are good and that His promises are trustworthy. Jesus’ parable reveals that the enemy’s strategy isn’t to destroy by burning the field to the ground but to disrupt by stealthfully sowing seeds of doubt and distrust. It should come as no surprise then that when Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, Satan’s strategy did not change.

Then the devil took [Jesus] to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone’” (Mt. 4:5-6, NIV).

But where we too often fail, Christ demonstrates his perfect obedience. In response to the devil’s twisting of Scripture

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” (Mt. 4:7-10, NIV).

How do we resist our old enemy, the devil? Not by trying harder and trusting in our own obedience. That’s our attempt at pulling weeds. No, we overcome by trusting in Christ’s perfect obedience on our behalf. As James says,

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (Jas. 4:7, NIV).

Lastly, Jesus’ parable provides us with a kingdom perspective on eternal punishment. Can we talk about hell for a minute? I only bring it up because Jesus first brought it up in this parable. I know that hell is a topic that some people find uncomfortable and frankly unpalatable. But we can’t avoid what the text says.

Earlier this month there was an opinion piece that appeared in the New York Times entitled *Why Do People Believe in Hell?* In it, the author, David Bentley Hart argued that

“The idea of eternal damnation is neither biblically, philosophically nor morally justified,”

and that

“No truly accomplished New Testament scholar, for instance, believes that later Christianity’s opulent mythology of God’s eternal torture chamber is clearly present in the scriptural text.”

I don’t consider myself to be an “accomplished New Testament scholar,” but in just Matthew’s Gospel alone I counted 16 different places where Jesus spoke about hell as a real place of eternal conscious punishment. And while some may doubt the reality of hell, Jesus didn’t.

Don’t misunderstand, hell isn’t merely a place where God sends naughty people. In Scripture, the theme of harvest is often used as a symbol of final judgment. Jesus’ parable illustrates God’s judgment that will take place at the end of the age. Those who have persisted in rebellion against their creator will receive their heart’s desire, a complete separation from God. And those who have trusted in God’s grace and mercy will enter the joy of His kingdom, not because of anything they have done, but entirely because of what Christ has done for us.

Hearing what Jesus says about hell shouldn’t fill us with doom and gloom, rather, it should move us to worship. Why? Because the ugliness of hell highlights the beauty of the cross. No one understands or appreciates the reality of hell more than God. God takes no pleasure in condemning unrepentant sinners to eternal conscious punishment, but God’s justice demands it.

But at the cross God’s justice and God’s love meet. At the cross Jesus Christ, the Son of God bears the just punishment for our sin as the wrath of God is poured out. At the cross God’s love for us, His love for rebellious, hell-deserving sinners like you and me is put on display. At the cross the problem of evil is answered. At the cross Satan our accuser is silenced. At the cross, God has made a way redemption so that hellbound men and women might instead know the blessing of eternity in His presence.

When I survey the wondrous cross  
on which the Prince of glory died,  
my richest gain I count but loss,  
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast  
save in the death of Christ, my God!

All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them through his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,  
sorrow and love flow mingled down.  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were a present far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
demands my soul, my life, my all.<sup>2</sup>

I pray that you might have eyes to see, and have ears to hear, and that you might gain the perspective of the kingdom of heaven.

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<sup>2</sup> *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, Isaac Watts