

## Chapter 51: The Parable of the Weeds

*Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43*

In Matthew 13:24–30, Jesus continues to teach about the kingdom of heaven. Furthermore, he continues to teach through parables that both reveal the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to believers, and that veil those same secrets from unbelievers (Matt. 13:11). In the parable of the weeds, Jesus takes up the question of the ongoing presence of evil in the world, as symbolized by weeds sown into a wheat field by an enemy. Here, Jesus assures us that he will finally judge evil in the world, but that he will not do so until the very end of the age. Therefore, Jesus teaches his people to *wait patiently for the kingdom*.

### **Wheat and Weeds (Matt. 13:24–26, 36–39a)**

Jesus continues his parables concerning the kingdom with a parable about wheat and weeds: “He 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’” (vv. 24–25). The first part of the scene would have been routinely familiar to an agrarian society, with a man sowing good seed into his field. This would have been a standard part of life, so that almost everyone hearing Jesus’ words could easily imagine themselves in the place of that sower.

The second part about the enemy sowing weeds in the field may be more familiar than we might think, for some commentators note that Roman law specifically prohibited sowing weeds into a field in the manner Jesus describes.<sup>1</sup> The specific weed Jesus talks about is probably “bearded darnel” (*lolium temulentum*), “which has grasslike foliage resembling that of wheat and of barley,”<sup>2</sup> and which “host to a fungus which, if eaten by animals or man, poisonous.”<sup>3</sup> These weeds, then, threatened to ruin the crop and potentially even to kill people who might eat it.

Because this crime was committed in the middle of the night, when the master and his servants were asleep (v. 25), no one knows what has happened until “the plants came up and bore grain,” at which time “the weeds appeared also” (v. 26). That is, while the first shoots came up, it was difficult to see that anything had happened because of the similarity of the plants. At some point, however, the shape of the plants become sufficiently clear to distinguish between weeds and wheat.

Later on, after the conclusion of this parable, Jesus returns to his house (see Matt. 13:1),<sup>4</sup> and his disciples ask him to interpret the parable (v. 36). To begin, Jesus explains that, “The one who sows

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<sup>1</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 524–25.

<sup>2</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 525.

<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 563.

<sup>4</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 221.

the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil” (vv. 37–39a). Let us consider each of these points of comparison in order.

### The Sower

When Jesus speaks about the “Son of Man” in the Gospel of Matthew, he is clearly talking about himself. He is also alluding to Daniel 7:13–14, where “behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” So, Jesus’ explanation that the sower is the Son of Man has an important function in explaining that “the Danielic glorified Son of Man...is sowing the seed that will result in his dominion over the world (cf. Dan 7:13–14).”<sup>5</sup> That Jesus is speaking about the everlasting dominion of the Son of Man provides essential context for interpreting this parable. Jesus is not telling a fable about a farmer; he is talking about how he will build his everlasting kingdom.

### The Field

Next, Jesus says that “the field is the world” (v. 38a). Often throughout this parable’s history of interpretation, commentators have argued that this is a parable dealing with the church specifically. If so, then this parable tells us that some in the church will be hypocrites, and that it will be difficult to fully purify the church until the final judgment. While that idea may be proved elsewhere from Scripture, it is not the point of Jesus’ parable here.<sup>6</sup> Rather, Jesus is addressing a fundamental confusion over the relative strength of his kingdom in this world. If Jesus is truly the Son of David, Messiah, and rightful king of Israel, why do some continue to defy him openly? “Where was the new world order they had been promised? What sort of ‘kingdom’ was this that allowed opposition to continue unchecked? Why did God not straightaway destroy the ‘sons of darkness’ and so make his world a place fit for the ‘sons of light’...?”<sup>7</sup> As we will see in the rest of the parable, Jesus gives a very specific answer to these questions.

### Good Seed, Weeds, and the Enemy

Beyond using the “everlasting dominion” suggested by describing the sower as the “Son of Man,” Jesus also brings the kingdom into view in his definition of the “good seed” as “the sons of the kingdom” (v. 38b). It is important to note that “seed” symbolizes something differently than in the parable of the sower/four soils, when the seed was the “word of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). Here, the good seed (and the wheat growing from the seed) symbolizes people who belong to the kingdom. Thus, these are the people who bear fruit for the kingdom, yielding “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Matt. 13:23).

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<sup>5</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 533.

<sup>6</sup> “If we so choose, we may reflect that the situation described in the parable is much like what we see in our church, but we should not take this as Jesus’ meaning. He is talking about the kingdom.” (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 351.)

<sup>7</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 533.

The weeds, then, “are the sons of the evil one” (v. 38c), since they are those who are sown by the enemy, who is “the devil” (v. 39). To say that these weeds are sown by the devil is not to say that unbelievers were created by the devil, as though there were two rival creators in the universe. On the contrary, the Bible is clear that God is the creator of all things visible and invisible, and that the devil can only corrupt what God originally created good. Therefore, Jesus is saying that these weeds represent the *sons* of the evil one in the sense that their character is derived from his. Jesus taught the same point in the Gospel of John when he told the Jewish leaders, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44a).

### **Longing Lament (Matt. 13:27–28)**

When the servants begin to recognize that weeds are growing alongside the wheat, they bring the weeds to the attention of their master: “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?” (v. 27). In response, the master says, “An enemy has done this” (v. 28a). Hendriksen observes that “the master’s answer is definite. The owner’s mind is not filled with any doubt whatever.”<sup>8</sup> Hearing this, the servants ask the master how he would wish to proceed: “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” (v. 28b).

The servants are echoing a question that arises throughout the Scriptures: “How long, O Lord?” (Job 7:19; 19:2; Ps. 6:3; 13:1, 2; 35:17; 74:9, 10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84; Is. 6:11; Jer. 47:6; Dan. 12:6; Hab. 1:2; 2:6; Zech. 1:12; Matt. 17:17; Acts 1:6; Rev. 6:10). They long for justice, so they ask whether it is the master’s will that this justice be established immediately. In every generation, believers struggle to understand the Lord’s purposes in delaying the unleashing of the full force of his righteousness on the earth. What purpose could it possibly serve to allow so many weeds to grow up in the world for so long? This question is the tension in this text, drawing our focus on the purpose behind this parable.

### **Protective Patience (Matt. 13:29–30; 39b–43)**

In response to the servants’ request, the master explains his reason not to uproot the weeds immediately: “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them” (v. 29). Commentators have interpreted these words differently. For some, the problem lies in the close visual similarity of the weeds and the wheat. They may be easily distinguished when they are fully grown, and they can in some instances be distinguished before the harvest, but the danger would be high that wheat would accidentally be plucked up in the efforts to rid the field of weeds. Others, however, argue the problem lies in the enmeshed roots of the weeds and the wheat: “The roots of darnel are stronger and deeper than those of wheat, so that removal of one would often result in the uprooting of the other....”<sup>9</sup> In either case, the reason not to pluck up weeds immediately is from a protective concern for the wellbeing of the wheat. As Peter writes, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

<sup>8</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 564.

<sup>9</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 384.

This does not mean, though, that the master intends to avoid dealing with the situation forever. Instead, he explains that the separation must come in the future: “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’” (v. 30). As Calvin writes, “He speaks of a separation, in order to prevent the minds of the godly from giving way to uneasiness or despondency, when they perceive a confused mixture of the good along with the bad.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, “Jesus is not teaching an imminent coming of the kingdom but is getting his disciples ready for a lengthy period before the harvest is to come. Evil will exist alongside the good until the eschaton.”<sup>11</sup> While the church must pursue her own purity so far as purity is possible (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:9–13; 1 John 3:3), she will find herself surrounded constantly by the wicked without recourse to remove them from the world altogether.<sup>12</sup> As Jesus explains to his disciples, “The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels” (v. 39b). The great separation of the righteous from the wicked is coming, but believers should not expect it until the very end of the age.<sup>13</sup>

To prevent anyone from thinking that this delay of justice is tantamount to a miscarriage of justice, Jesus continues to explain the wrath that is coming against the unrighteous: “Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (vv. 40–42). We should observe that the explanation Jesus gives for the final judgment extends much longer than the corresponding portion of the parable in v. 30. This helps us to see that “the climax of the parable is, indeed, the final judgment.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the climax of final judgment is God’s answer to the plaintive cry of his people: “How long, O Lord?”

Still, final judgment does not only include punishment for the wicked. Moreover, Jesus says, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear” (v. 43). The language of “shining like the sun” is probably an allusion to Daniel 12:3: “And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever.”<sup>15</sup> In that context, Daniel is also speaking about the final separation and judgment of some to “everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2). Not only is Jesus associating himself with the Son of Man from Daniel’s vision (Dan. 7:13–14), but as the final Judge that Daniel prophesied.

Notably, Jesus gives one further detail to Daniel’s prophecy by describing the coming kingdom as “the kingdom of their Father.” As Morris writes, this description “perhaps brings out the thought that the one who will rule us through eternity is a father to us. The kingdom is not harsh authority but fatherly love.”<sup>16</sup> Believers can have confidence as we wait amidst injustice and unrighteousness because of the certainty of final punishment for the wicked and of our Father’s love to bring us into his kingdom.

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<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:119.

<sup>11</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 522.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 536.

<sup>13</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 395.

<sup>14</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 535.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 374.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 358.

## Discussion Questions

1. In the parable of the weeds, who does the sower represent (v. 37)? When Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man, what is he claiming for himself (see Dan. 7:13–14)? How does this allusion to the Old Testament help us to understand the nature of Jesus' "kingdom of heaven"? What does the field represent (v. 38a)? How does this point help to clarify our interpretation of the parable? What do the good seeds and weed seeds represent (v. 38b)?
2. How do the servants react when they discover weeds growing up in the field (v. 27)? What do the servants ask the Master to do, once they recognize those weeds (v. 28)? If the weeds in the field represent the "sons of the evil one" in "the world" (see v. 38), how do the reactions of these servants match how we see God's people reacting to evil elsewhere in the Bible? What evil in the world burdens your heart to cry out, "How long, O Lord?"?
3. Why is the master unwilling to gather up the weeds before the harvest (v. 29)? What does he command instead (v. 30)? Where do you struggle in seeing God's delay in bringing his justice and righteousness to the earth? How does Jesus help us to see that God's delay in justice is merciful toward his wheat (i.e., toward his people, the sons of righteousness)? How does that reshape your thinking of God's purposes in permitting evil in this world?
4. Why do you think that Jesus devotes his second parable about the kingdom of heaven to the theme of patience for the coming of the kingdom? Why is patience so hard for you? Why does Jesus put such high priority on patience? How might this parable help you to avoid panic as you wait for the kingdom? How does this parable prevent us from passivity as we await the kingdom? How does this parable assure us that we will not wait perpetually for the kingdom?