

Parable of the Weeds - Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43

Today we come to the end of the parables in Matthew 13, the parables of the Kingdom. We have seen a number of lessons can be drawn from these parables and as I have said I hope that this will encourage you to go and dwell on these parables.

To put this parable in the context of what we have looked at so far; this is the second parable Jesus taught and also one of only 2 that he gives an interpretation to. This parable follows the parable of the sower and Jesus is still in a boat teaching the crowds on the shore.

Here we have the parable of the weeds, or more accurately the parable of the wheat and tares. This is a parable I half knew before but I think I had often tied it together with the previous parable of the sower. It does immediately follow it but I would suggest we put that out of our minds as we can become confused. The lessons are quite different and can become tangled if we try too hard to marry the two. Lets look at this one afresh then on it's own.

Matthew 13:24-30 / 36-43 - NKJV

Here we have another man sowing seed in his field. Now Jesus explains this parable and who everyone is so lets do a brief run through of who is who before we start getting into the teaching. The sower is the son of man - Jesus. The field is the world and the good seed represents the sons of the Kingdom. A quick aside is that the word used for seed here is the same as is used in phrases such as the 'seed of Abraham' so it does not just mean the seed but what the seed becomes, i.e. the seed of Abraham is Abraham's descendants or the seed here is the wheat and it's ears also. The enemy is the devil and the tares are the sons of the evil one. We then move onto the end of time when the angels will gather the harvest, us.

We can learn a lot from this parable about how God works, how the enemy works and how we are to react to this. However, lets start by making the same mistake the servants in the parable make and deal with their question. 'Where then did the weeds come from'. What we are not going to look at this morning is the problem of evil, more specifically where evil comes from. We could tie ourselves in circles about this but there is no real answer and I am not going to try and find one. More importantly the bible doesn't give us one, the owner of the field sums up the problem of evil by saying 'an enemy did this'. That is all we get, this is all the bible gives us so let's not spend our time trying to reason or decipher anything else.

We have this man who sows good seed in his field. This parable, like the others, works in three times if you like, it is a quick summary of Genesis and the fall, it is an explanation of what happens from day to day and it is prophetic of what will happen in the future.

Let's consider Genesis. A man sows good seed in a field - God created the heavens and

the earth and everything in it. God saw what he had made and it was very good. But whilst everyone was sleeping an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. When Adam and Eve fell it was because the enemy came and sowed seeds of doubt, of confusion, lies. We learn a lot about how the enemy works here, in Genesis and in this parable. He loves to get us off guard, when we are sleeping. But notice that the enemy can't come and uproot the wheat, he can only come and sow weeds by it and leave them to do the work. He is powerless to remove or destroy the Kingdom.

God created. It was good, the devil is in the business of perverting what is good, of upsetting God's good creation. The devil distorts what is good, what is holy, what is pure. He does not create anything, he has nothing new to offer, just a twist of what was originally good. There are many examples of this but one easy example of this is sex. You can't say sex in church. Why is that such a big thing? Because the devil has twisted what is a pure and good creation into something we consider shameful. In fact he has done this so well that we naturally feel embarrassed because it automatically conjures up images of the distortion rather than God's creation. It happens with lots of things where things have turned so far upside-down that the World barely recognises God's original creation but rather knows the distortion.

In Genesis God does not uproot the evil but lets both carry on, as in the parable, instead he is focused on the long game, the work of salvation.

So this parable has already happened. It is also still happening.

The devil has sown his seeds, there is nothing new, he is not the cunning gentleman portrayed but a deceiver who can be resisted so long as we are not asleep. He is in the business of setting up a counterfeit reality, anything that resembles good but is a perversion of it. Satan will use the truth to tempt us, just look at his quoting of scripture when tempting Jesus, it's subtle but completely wrong, a misuse of scripture.

We get a glimpse of this in the parable and if we look at what the devil does. We have a man who sows good seed, this is Jesus, and an enemy who sows weeds. This in itself simply tells us that there is good and evil and where they come from. This is why we need to look initially at the King James version. If we look at what the enemy actually sows it tells us a lot more than this. The King James version talks about tares. The word used in Greek is Zizanion and we know it as the weed Darnel. What is interesting about this weed is that it looks exactly like wheat until the wheat grows ears, so both can grow together and look identical. This explains why the farmer is so concerned that the servants will make mistakes, sometimes it is hard to tell who is good and who is bad. It is hard to tell what seed is growing inside. We are not qualified to make that judgement, only God is.

We are not called to weed the Kingdom, why, because we can get it wrong. There are times when people can look like weeds who are actually working in the Kingdom. Sadly there are other times when people can do and say the right things but they are not in the Kingdom. The Church has unfortunately tried to weed the Kingdom in the past, let's

look at an example of what happens when we do try and weed the Kingdom.

In the 1100s the Pope was the undisputed head of the Catholic church. You were either in or you were out. There was no wonderful protestant church to come running to if you are excommunicated. However, there were the beginnings of some dissenters, some we can now look back on and see the beginnings of the reformation, others were simply heretics. Therefore the Pope set up inquiries into peoples beliefs in order to ensure the Church was biblical, or pure. Not necessarily a bad thing, make sure there are no heretics in the church, those who would lead others astray, ensure peoples beliefs are biblical. Churches today often have meetings before membership is allowed to inquire into a Christian's beliefs. However, by the time we get to Pope Innocent III we have inquisitors who are answerable only to the Pope and can punish 'heretics' with removal of their rights. We're beginning to lose our way here, once we start things get more and more extreme, what appears a good path actually if you take it to it's extreme is dangerous. Finally in 1252 Pope Innocent IV allowed the Inquisition the use of torture to get heretics to confess. And so we see what happens when the Church tries to rid itself, or the world, of evil. What is a good start soon becomes not only sinful but risks removing those who are seeking God. A lot of good men were tortured and died because they didn't fit a mould the Church wanted.

We are not called to weed the Kingdom because we cannot do it. We compromise ourselves if we try. We have a chequered past of crusades and judgement that all arise from the Church's seemingly insatiable need to judge and remove evil. Today there are Churches that will protest at funerals of servicemen or homosexuals. I really struggle to see Jesus in that. The Church can try and rid the world of evil in these ways but all it does is deter people from seeking God.

We remove evil by demonstrating pure goodness, not by using evil. As they say two wrongs don't make a right.

The devil loves to twist what is good. He loves to tempt good men with good intentions to do 'good things' with terrible consequences. Sometimes our good intentions can be our worst enemy, if they are not examined and expressed appropriately. As they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Or as someone else put it 'sometimes the solution can be the problem'.

Jesus knew that this was not the way, if God has not removed evil how can we? But we do, we try and remove difficult people from churches, We decide what sins are beyond our acceptance. Now, as with so many things there is a balance to be met here. Jesus also taught that if a man sins and will not listen to the church he is to be treated like a pagan. But the Church has to accept that there is and, until God comes again, always will be evil and our job is not to remove it.

Sometimes those who have a fresh vision of God have the hardest time in the Church because we think we know good and bad. Sadly there are times that as well as evil trying to look like good the Church can resemble the weeds. God's people were often the ones

who killed the prophets, and God's priests murdered his son. I feel that Coundon is really open to God and to people who want to follow God but who may not fit the perceived mould of 'Christian'. Let's keep doing this.

So let's not try and rid the world of evil, it is a lesson in futility. Let's let it be so that we don't risk the loss of any one of the wheat, of those who actually love and serve God, or want to. We will not make the Church a better place by removing those we see as weeds, history tells us that we will make it worse and this parable prophesies that we will remove those who are God's children. Stamping out evil is a distortion of zealously, Paul was always very zealous for God, he wanted to rid the world of the evil Christianity. But his jealousy blinded him to Jesus and he needed to see again to follow God not jealousy.

Proverbs 11:27 says that 'He who seeks Good finds goodwill, but evil comes to him who searches for it'. Or as Johnny Carson said 'choose your enemies carefully because you will become like them' in other words we can become angry at angry people, intolerant of intolerance or bigoted against a bigot. If we focus on the negative we risk echoing it.

It is our job to resist it, We will look at this later but this is not a one sided thing, we have a balance to strike. But this parable teaches us a lot about how we shouldn't act in the face of evil, or the world.

The Devil plants seeds by gossip and slander, he is pleased if we are focused on his work, people's faults, rather than God's work, their potential. Luther said 'We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbours, but defend them, speak well of them, and explain their actions in the kindest ways.' I like that, explain their actions in the kindest ways, assume the best not the worst.

I often wonder why I find it so easy to judge, why the Church has often forgotten this parable. I think we love the Church and we love God and we can feel protective over her, we can be over zealous, like Paul was, but we can miss God's movement because of this zealousness, like Paul nearly did. Let's be clear about one thing, God can and will deal with his enemy, he does not need our protection. An old seminary said that 'you defend God like you defend a lion. You get out of his way'. This parable tells us to do that, let it be, resist it and God will sort it out in the end.

As far as questionable people go God's church is open to all. When Jesus was crucified those nails went through his hands and they nailed the doors of the church open, Christians throughout history have tried to close them ever since. None of us deserve to be here, in the church, in Christ's body, but when we are in it is human nature to try and change the entrance policy so that no one else like us can get in.

Simon Weil points out 'it is to the prodigal that the memory of their father's house comes back. If the son had lived economically he would never have thought of returning.' The church doors are open to sinners, it won't be the good living well off people who come into the church, it will be the broken needy and if they can't come here where can they? I believe that God is moving in Coundon and I believe that he is opening the doors wider

than ever before and we should be ready for those who need healing, who need forgiveness and who need God to come in. Let's remember this parable, God will work in people as they draw near to him, if we want to help we get out of the way, and pray.

Is this a case for pacifism? I believe in non-violence, but this is not what we mean by pacifism, pacifism is not reacting, doing nothing, just letting something pass.

Let's go back to the parable and see what the owner of the field tells his servants to do. He tells them to 'let both grow together until harvest'. Again this tells us that there will be both wheat and tares and that we should let them be. However, this is another case where the English language does not do the bible justice. The word used here is Aphiemi. Now Aphiemi can be translated as to 'permit' or to 'suffer' something, to let it be. However, in the King James version of the Bible of the 156 times the word Aphiemi is used 47 times it is translated as 'forgive'. When the Church read this teaching they would immediately have made the connection as they will have just prayed it, it is used in the Lord's prayer - 'forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us'.

We are called to forgive. We are forgiven by grace and with the same measure we need to be forgiving those around us. Many a Martyr has understood this when going to their death and that witness has seen many people saved. We are to turn the other cheek.

Possibly the hardest hitting use of the word Aphiemi is when Jesus was on the cross, 'forgive them' he said, Aphiemi, for they do not know what they are doing. Jesus on the cross is not uprooting the weeds but rather conquering the garden, redeeming everything in it. He has stripped the devil's power and made all things possible, even forgiveness, if we choose it.

We are therefore certainly not called to be passive, we are to forgive, one of the most powerful weapons we have, and we are called to pray for our enemies.

I know that this can sound like permissiveness. Especially when we consider that this parable does not have a limit on how many times we should allow or forgive the sin. But let's be honest, we are all sinners, we all keep sinning and God accepts us back, we are therefore called to forgive and accept each other, regardless of what has been done. If God can forgive so can we. Just after Jesus teaches us to pray he says 'If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins' again aphiemi. Forgiveness is not permissiveness, that is a distorted view of forgiveness, forgiveness is extremely powerful and many times does more to challenge someone than a rebuke does.

However, we come back to that balance again. I work in assessing and managing the risk that people pose to others. I can forgive someone but that does not necessarily mean I will put them in a situation where there is a risk posed to someone else. We can be wise, there are ways to protect others without just closing the door on people. But this is where

I don't envy our leaders. These are hard decision to make, a difficult balance to strike, our leaders need our support.

But where does all of this leave spiritual warfare, after all, Paul said that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Jesus cast out demons, he didn't just leave them be. Where do we draw the line. We are not called to be passive but we are told here that we are not to weed.

We need to understand what the seeds of the devil really are. I don't think that they are people but that they represent sin and temptation. Things that we can't remove, especially by removing people. No one is 100% good or bad, but we can chose to nurture God's spirit in us or the temptations around us. I think that the seeds here are the seeds of the flesh or of the spirit. This is where that battle Paul describes comes from. So we can forgive sin, we shouldn't try and remove people because of their mistakes, but we can act, we can challenge and we can minister to them. If someone comes to us bound in any way we don't just sit by and feel sorry for them, God has given us power to deal with it. That's not to say we go out and pick a fight with any spiritual matter we can find, until Christ returns there will be evil and we will not be rid of it. But we are equipped to not just be a sitting target. Notice it is not until the explanation that Jesus specifies not only those who sin but also everything that causes sin. We are not to uproot those who sin, but spiritual forces that interfere with those people are to be dealt with like Jesus did.

I think that when Jesus returns, when it is time to weed the Kingdom the field will look a lot different than it does in the parable. Everyone will have had the opportunity to bear fruit, to accept Jesus Christ. Everyone will have reached the consequences of that choice to nurture the spirit or the flesh. I believe that when Jesus comes to weed there will be the wheat standing tall bearing fruit and the weeds will be shrivelled beside them, there will not be the worry of looking the same because all things will have had time to reach their end.

Notice the parable does not say anything about the wheat reacting to the weeds, it does not bend over to accommodate it. We are shown here, and in history, that trying to weed the Kingdom is futile; however, this does not mean that we are not to stand up for good, for what is right. We are told to resist evil. Jesus challenged evil and oppression. To react in the face of evil, to stand up for what is right is not trying to weed but bearing fruit, it is making the difference between the fruit of the Kingdom and the barrenness of following the devil very clear for others to recognise.

The Church is called to lead by example, in our lifestyle, in our love for one another and in our forgiveness. This parable tells us that we have a responsibility to grow and develop fruit. Note that the weeds and the wheat are very similar as they grow until the wheat grows ears, or becomes fruitful. The world will not see another way unless we show them one, Jesus said 'by their fruit you will know them'. If we do not shine, if we do not show Christ to others they will not see the difference between their lives and ours.

We also have a responsibility to not judge, there may be those we don't recognise as seeking God who are. I'm not speaking about universalism, not all paths lead to God, there is only one way to the father and that is through Jesus Christ; however, there are many ways to follow Christ, and often the more out there someone is in their faith the more we can learn about the rut we have fallen into.

This parable finishes with the end of time when the harvest will happen. The angels will go out and weed out everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is where our salvation comes in as we are evil doers, but this is another glimpse back to the Old Testament. Remember when the angel of death is sent to Egypt and the Israelites are instructed to smear the blood of a lamb over their doors and they would be spared. This was a foreshadow of our salvation. When the angels go to reap the harvest they will see the blood of the lamb over us and they will not touch us. We are redeemed, the father sees Jesus. We are made righteous. The parable finishes with 'then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father'. That's us.

We have this promise, this hope, that we will be in the Kingdom shining like the sun. There is therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Isn't it therefore worth taking a risk on those who do not know him, isn't it worth leaving the evil, forgiving it, in the hope that people will come to Christ. We can not lose anything of importance to us. I would not want to stand before God and have to account for being responsible for uprooting someone who wanted to follow him.

Another way to look at this is a story. Tom is a little boy who from birth has screwed his face up to look distorted. His Dad did it, his Mum did it, it's all he knows. Tom moves out to University and he moves in with a lot of attractive people who look after themselves, they don't screw their faces up and they are all very pretty to Tom. Now some of them mock Tom, they make him feel really small and ugly. They say 'we are being cruel to be kind' but the truth is that all they are doing is pushing Tom away so that he keeps screwing up his face until it hurts. But Tom finds a group of friends who are nice to him. They love and accept Tom as he is, they keep showing him their straight faces, and show him a loving environment within which Tom starts to think 'I want to be more like them'. Slowly but surely Tom starts to unscrew his face. This may take time but, led by example, Tom finds a relaxed natural way to have his face and he looks beautiful. He doesn't need to be told about his different face, he knows it every time he sees a normal face, he doesn't need to be judged, just loved and led.

Ok, it's a naff story but you get the idea. A loving environment can encourage change, judgement doesn't. I think that this parable speaks about this.

I don't think that this parable is easy to follow as it takes seriously the lesson to turn the other cheek, to forgive. This, if done properly, is never easy. But God the father is judge and he is good.

Let's let God do the weeding, he will make a better job of it and we won't risk our selves or others in the process. When the Church tries to weed it always comes off looking worse, but when it accepts and forgives it starts to resemble the spotless bride Jesus is coming back for.

So we have looked at this set of parables on the Kingdom and started to dig into them. We have learnt how the Kingdom is planted in us and others, how it grows, what we should or shouldn't do, the importance and value of the Kingdom and those in it and finally where it is all heading. As far as helping us seek the Kingdom first I think that these lessons help but I have come to the absolute conclusion that the Kingdom is still a complete mystery and if anyone tells you that they understand it or how it operates they are either self deceived or foolish. The whole Bible, if it can be summed up, is about the mystery of the Kingdom and shows us that His ways are not our ways.

Let's walk that fine line with the balance of the bible's teaching on either side.

I have really enjoyed the parables we have looked at and I feel that I have got a lot out of them. I'd encourage you to pick one and wrestle with it. There are a lot more parables in the rest of Matthew so there is a lot more to look into, Jesus taught a lot about the Kingdom in his teaching and his actions, he said that he had come to declare the Kingdom and we have the joy of being in that Kingdom.

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