

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 07/23/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, July 23rd

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Life in the field

This week's lectionary text continues from the Parable of the Sower and features another parable about the Kingdom: The Parable of the Weeds. Jesus' continuing use of vivid agricultural imagery would have communicated compelling and unmistakable truths about the Kingdom. These same truths are often the very same answers we seek today, particularly amidst the events we are living through today.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 Commentary

As a reminder, we find Jesus in a boat preaching and teaching to the crowds on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee in what would have been a natural auditorium. Facing growing opposition from religious leaders, Jesus can no longer teach in the Synagogues. He takes His message directly to the people. This text is found in the third discourse, or teaching block, within Matthew's Gospel and is often referred to as the Parabolic Discourse (13:1-53). This section reveals mysteries of the Messianic Kingdom.

²⁴He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field,

The Kingdom of Heaven is synonymous with Kingdom of God only Matthew, as a Jew writing to other Jews about Christ, is reluctant to use God's name. The Kingdom of Heaven thus refers to the realm over which God reigns. In the Parabolic Discourse and other sections of Matthew's Gospel Jesus draws on many common experiences to describe the arrival and nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. In this case the text is obvious: "*The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to...*" In other examples it is often "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like...*" (vv. 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, and others). This is a feature of Matthew's Gospel. In the Parable of the Sower the focus was on the soil. In the current parable the focus is on the seed.

²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.

²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.

While the owner of the field sowed wheat seed, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. The Greek word used is the plural of *zizanian* which is used only here in the New Testament. According to Barclay, the Hebrew word from which the Greek word derives is *zunim* which is connected to the word for fornication. The weed was thus referred to as "bastard wheat." The specific weed referred to in this parable is most likely bearded

darnel (*Lolium temulentum*). It is a type of rye grass that produces black seeds that are bitter and mildly toxic. Darnel looks like wheat during the early stages, but the seeds are easily recognizable later. ¹

²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ 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."'"

Once the servants of the master realize what has happened, they ask the master if they should remove the weeds from the field. The master rightly recognizes that by the time the wheat and darnel could be differentiated, their respective roots would have become intertwined and thus the wheat would also have become damaged. The master recognizes that the separation would have to wait until the harvest. While the two plants could easily be distinguished, it was a very labor-intensive process. This sabotage would have had an economic impact on the landowner. Such sabotage was apparently a common occurrence since the Romans had a law against it. The wheat ends up in the barn whereas the weeds end up being burnt.

³⁶ Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field."

There are two short parables and a short statement about the prophecy and parables that are omitted in the lectionary text that occurs between the Parable of the Weeds and its explanation (vv. 31-35). The disciples ask Jesus for an explanation. This explanation certainly helps our interpretation.

³⁷ He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 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, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

The allegorical explanation is very clear:

The One who sows the good seed = the Son of Man (v. 37). The field = the world (v. 38). The good seed = the sons of the Kingdom (v. 38). The weeds = the sons of the evil one (v. 38). The enemy = the devil (v. 39). The harvest = the end of the age (v. 39). The reapers = the angels (v. 39).

There are some who argue the field represents Israel or the church, but the explanation is clear. The field represents the world.

⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,

⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

The eschatological implications of the explanation are then provided. "Fiery furnace...weeping and gnashing of teeth" is the typical description used by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel of final judgment (cf. 8:12; 13:50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). The righteous, on the other hand, "will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." This poetic language is from Daniel 12:3 describing what the righteous can look forward to - reflecting the brightness of the glory of God.

¹ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 85-86.

Reflections

We must remember the original audience for this parable lived in the region of the Fertile Crescent - one of the first areas where civilization emerged. It did so because of wheat. The cultivation of wheat produced enough calories to allow time to be spent on other activities beyond subsistence. The bread made from the wheat was the building block of civilization and at the family level it was a matter of life and death. Bread and the system that produced it was held in much higher regard than it is today in much of the west. We find daily bread was important enough to be included in the Lord's Prayer and Jesus referred to Himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:36). Such a parable would have been a compelling way to deliver an unmistakable message.

If the owner of the field represents the Son of Man and the field represents the world, then Christ owns the entire world. We must not forget Christ has an enemy (13:39). The parable illustrates how there are two types of seed and two sowers. The good seed represents the *sons of the Kingdom* or those who allow God to rule their lives. The weeds are the *sons of the evil one*, or those who rule their own lives and essentially worship themselves as God. This is a binary option, not a continuum. This provokes the question, which seed am I?

When the servants seek to address the problem of the weeds it is the Master who essentially says, "I will take care of the weeds, not you." A nuance within this parable that the original audience would have recognized is that the weeds and the wheat would have been indistinguishable for a time. Until the plants were mature enough to tell apart, what looks like wheat could just as easily be a weed and vice versa. Like the servants in this parable, we are often quick to want to rid ourselves of the weeds. We are quick to judge, yet how can we be sure? We really do not know who the wheat is and who is the weeds. It is enough that we must recognize there are weeds in the field and there will one day be a harvest. Judgment will happen but we must leave it up to the judge in His own good time.

The seed grows where it is planted. The good seed is in the field (i.e., the world) growing side by side, roots intertwined with the weeds. For those Christians tempted to withdraw from the world, in the parable the Master admonishes his servants to let the good seed and the weeds to both grow together. Our job is to be in the field, among the weeds bearing fruit until the harvest.

Another nuance of the parable that may be incidental is the image of the mature wheat versus the mature dandelion. As wheat matures the seeds grow sufficiently large that the heads bend over from the weight. The dandelion seeds are not as heavy and so the heads remain more upright. The image emerges of a mature Christian with his or her head bowed in the spirit of humility compared to the arrogance and pride of those who worship themselves.

In Jesus' time, the Jews were wondering what the Messianic Kingdom would be like. If God ruled the earth, what would happen to the Romans? Jesus painted a very different picture of God's rule on earth. Indeed, many people ask a similar question today - If the Kingdom of God is already inaugurated on earth, why is there so much evil in the world? An answer to that question is provided in this week's text. There are weeds in the field. Pulling up the weeds will destroy the wheat. One day the harvest will come. Then there will be judgment and then the Kingdom will be fully consummated. Until then we live in a world sometimes not knowing who the wheat is and who is the weed. We just nurture the seeds and seedlings in front of us and leave the rest up to God.

Application

- What are the dangers of trying to label others as either wheat or weed?
- Whose responsibility is it to label the weeds and deal with them?
- What is our responsibility in God's field?

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