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Judgment and God's Patience

Matthew 13:24-30

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One of the issues that preoccupies many spiritual or religious people is, "*Who's in and who's out? Who's good and who's bad? Who is blessed and who isn't? Who is going to make it in the end and who is not?*" This was probably the biggest question that emerged in the small group discussions in our Who Is Jesus series we had in April and May and the Question and Answer session I led on June 4. So for the next four weeks I am going to be talking about some different aspects of this question. Today we begin with a parable of Jesus that seems to be about "*Who's in and who's out? Who's good and who's bad? Who is going to make it in the end and who isn't?*"

"He put before them another parable: **The kingdom of heaven** may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, '*Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?*'

He answered, '*An enemy has done this.*'

The slaves said to him, '*Then do you want us to go and gather them?*' But he replied, '**No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest**; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'

Earlier in Matthew 3:12, John the Baptist said that when the Messiah came he would, "*gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" Some religious folks who heard John's words and observed Jesus were disturbed by the fact Jesus wasn't doing what John the Baptist had said the More Powerful One would do. Jesus wasn't separating the wheat from the chaff or in this parable the wheat from the weeds. In fact, he was drawing and attracting folks who didn't know or do God's law and didn't have a religious or moral leg to stand on before a Holy God. To people who thought of themselves as *wheat*, Jesus was surrounded by people they regarded as *weeds*.

Then and now people are itching and eager for Jesus to separate the wheat from the weeds. It seems some people are almost looking forward to *other* people getting what's coming to them for *their* sins. In the parable the trouble begins with an enemy

who comes under the cover of darkness, sows weeds among the wheat and then goes away. When the weeds appear among the wheat, the servants question the farmer about his seed selection and he replies, *“An enemy has done this.”*

The servants want to take action and strike back against the work of this unseen enemy by wading through the fields ripping up the evil weeds wherever they may be found. That way the only plants in the field will be the ones *they know* are good. The farmer is wise enough to know this isn't the right course of action and advises patience. The most important words in the parable are these: **“Let both of them grow together until the harvest.”**

To those who know anything about gardening or farming, the approach Jesus is advocating sounds like no way to run a farm. Two bad things happen if we never weed a garden or a field. The weeds choke out the good plants we want, as Jesus describes in his parable of the sower earlier in this very chapter (Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23). You also end up with a bumper crop of weed seeds to plague next season's planting. Based on some of his parables we may assume Jesus was a much better carpenter than he was a farmer or that he was more interested in teaching life changing spiritual truth than advocating proper farming techniques. The spiritual idea he is expressing is that **prior to God's final separation at judgment good and bad are mixed in the field of the world and in the field of the church.** Allowing the servants of the farmer to separate or sort the good from the bad is expressly and patently rejected for very good reasons. The weeds, tares, or darnel (*Lolium temulentum*) are an annual grass that looks very much like wheat. This says something significant about the relationship between the kingdom of heaven and evil in the world – **they can look very much alike and can be very difficult to distinguish.** The early stages of wheat and darnel resemble each other closely as do true disciples and false believers. This was a crucially important concern to Matthew who was greatly disturbed by the mixed state of the church which then and now contains many who enthusiastically call Jesus “Lord,” but who refuse to follow his ethical teaching, who do not commit themselves to living, thinking, and relating to people and God the way Jesus demands (Matthew 7:21-27, 13:47-50, 22:11-14). Jesus is saying people are not capable of carrying out the separation effectively; we cannot truly know who is in and who is out. We can't discern people's hearts and if we try to make an effective separation, we will commit serious errors in judgment and uproot good wheat along with the tares.

The impatient, retaliatory reaction of the servants, *do you want us to go and gather them?*” is precisely the response the enemy is hoping for from the servants of the farmer. The enemy knows he has no power against good; the wheat is in the field, the kingdom has been sown in the world and there is not a thing he can do about it. But the enemy only needs the negative power of people to wreak havoc. The enemy goes away after sowing the weeds because he has done his job and has no reason to hang around. The enemy relies on the children of light getting impatient and frustrated enough to do his work for him. The farmer knows the servants’ idea for dealing with the menace as they see it - **“Rip ‘em out,”** is even more of a threat than what the enemy has already done.

The servants in the parable, like the disciples of Jesus then and now, seem to be preoccupied with the problem of evil. The disciples don’t understand the parable so they say to Jesus, *‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.’* **They frame their question as if the weeds are the focus instead of the kingdom of heaven.** Often people do the same thing, *“Didn’t you sow good seed in your world God, what’s the story with all the evil all around? When are you going to stick it to all the evil people?”* We will never have a satisfactory answer regarding the existence of evil. The Bible’s answer to the question is, *“an enemy has done this.”* The real issue for followers of Jesus is, **how should we act in the presence of evil.**

To the servants and disciples credit, they want to help deal with evil, but they and we need guidance from Jesus about what to do. The question is: **whose methods are you going to use in dealing with the problem of evil – your methods or those of Jesus?**

Jesus’ method is “let, permit, suffer” both good and evil to grow together until the harvest. The Greek word translated “let” (aphienai) occurs 156 times in the King James Version of the Bible. Most commonly, 52 times, it is translated “leave” (permit, let go, or send away). Second most, 47 times, it is translated when applied to debts, trespasses, and sins as “forgive.” This is same word we use in the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, *“forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.”* Interestingly, in Greek the same word is used for “forgiveness” and “permission.”

One of the most challenging aspects of this parable for us in the time in which we live is Jesus stating that his servants’ response to the evil sowed in the field of the world is **not to retaliate violently against it.** This doesn’t mean we do nothing if we know a person is being harmed or in danger, of course we intervene appropriately. It does

mean malice and evil, in the world and in the lives of people are not to be dealt with by attacking or trying to eliminate the things or persons in which it dwells. Until the harvest evil is to be patiently endured and suffered. This is very difficult for us to hear or accept because we think it is naïve and many of us reject Jesus' teaching on this point.

We don't think it makes sense or believe it is possible because we are thinking about it from a human point of view, rather than from the perspective of the kingdom of heaven. When we feel we're hurt, attacked, or wronged our pride gets up; we nurse anger, bitterness, and self-righteousness over how we've been wronged until we've whipped up our energy and emotion like a hurricane with ourselves as the eye. We then direct that negative energy against those who have wronged us; or against others who had nothing to do with it. We go striding into the fields ripping up weeds and tramping down wheat in the process and then when we've expended our energy we turn and look at the mess we've made in the field and it looks worse than it did before.

Maybe one day we'll learn Jesus' approach is not only possible; it is healthier and more effective. Yet we fear if we respond as Jesus tells us to, that we'll be taken advantage of. It is amazing to consider the farmer in Jesus' parable has basically said the enemy is free to return any night and sow more weeds. I would say the enemy continues to do so. But it hasn't stopped the wheat of the kingdom from growing. And in the strange world of the parable, if you give some of the weeds enough time, they just might end up converting from weeds to wheat.

Even when he was crucified on the cross Jesus didn't threaten, wipe out, or even condemn those who committed that evil. He forgave them. Jesus told his followers they were to forgive their brothers and sisters 70 x 7 times. We just don't do this, as we should. Ask yourself, when some one at church, home, work or school does something you don't like, what do I do? I'll tell you what we sometimes do. We get mad, we stew, we fret, we withdraw, we rant, we gossip, and we try to get even. We send emails or texts, we martial people to our side, and unlike 1 Corinthians 13, we insist on trying to get our way. In the midst of it all, we fail to forgive. We respond this way out of our humanness instead of out of the Spirit of Christ dwelling within us. We simply are not intending to do what Jesus teaches us, which is to forgive.

The main point of the parable is not that there will be an end-time payback of all wrongs from which we will be spared, but in which all the really bad, evil, sinful weedy people, will be punished. **The main point is, as servants of Jesus we are to patiently endure wrongs in the present.** Not striking back against a trouble-making enemy is

thoroughly consistent with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where he said (Matthew 5:39), *"But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer."*

The wheat and the weeds in the world and in the church are so difficult to distinguish, God the farmer knows that attempts to get rid of evil are likely to destroy much of the wheat the servants are trying to protect or help in uprooting the evil weeds. Good and evil inhabit not only the world, but also individual human beings. No one is completely good and pure, nor is anyone 100% evil. If we seriously tried to uproot all the evil in the world we would end up getting rid of virtually everyone. Jesus says patience is necessary because people can't effectively discern or separate good from evil. When we attempt to do so we often end up doing more harm than good because we can't tell wheat from weeds the way God can.

A poem put it this way,
A little seed lay on the ground,
And soon began to sprout.
Seeing all the flowers around
It wondered, "How shall I come out?"

The lily's face is fair and proud,
But just a trifle cold.
The rose, I think, is rather loud,
And its fashion's getting old.

Of the violet some may think well,
But it's not a flower I'd choose;
Nor even canterbury bell,
I've never cared for blues."

And so it criticized each flower,
This haughty little seed,
Until it woke one summer noon,
And found itself a weed!

When it comes to judgment and who is in and who is out, Jesus says God has fixed the final moment of separation. That time has not yet come. God is incredibly patient. The seeds must be allowed to ripen to reveal their true nature and character. We still live in the season of growing, not separation and harvest. If you want to be sure that you are good wheat in God's field then by all means make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ that produces a life of growing discipleship and spiritual maturity that reveals to all that you are not a weed. The opportunity for repentance, change, and transformation has not yet run out. I don't want to be criticizing others only to discover too late that I am a weed and not wheat. Until that harvest day, all false religious zeal

must be checked, the farmer provides no place for purges, pogroms or programs to strike back violently at the evil weeds sowed by the enemy. All seeds are allowed to ripen, with everything else left to the God who urges patience when people crave for punishment.

"Let anyone with ears listen!"

Prayer: Grant Me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know, to love what I ought to love, to praise what delights you most, to value what is precious in your sight, to hate what is offensive to you.

Do not allow me to judge according to the sight of my eyes, nor pass sentence according to the hearing of the ears of ignorant persons, but to discern with true judgment between things visible and spiritual, and above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of your will.

Thomas a Kempis, 15th century

Lord Jesus, by the indwelling of your Holy Spirit, purge our eyes to discern and contemplate you until we attain to see as you see, judge as you judge, choose as you choose; and having sought and found you to behold you forever and ever. We ask this for your name's sake. Amen.

Christine Rossetti, 19th Century

Blessing: James 2:12-13

**So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.
For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy;
mercy triumphs over judgment.**