

## Weeds Among Wheat: The Problem of Persistent Evil

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43 (NIV)

<sup>24</sup> Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup> But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup> When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. <sup>27</sup> "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' <sup>28</sup> " 'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' <sup>29</sup> " 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" <sup>36</sup> Then he 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." <sup>37</sup> He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> 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, <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. <sup>40</sup> "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

There is evil in our world. I don't think any of you will disagree with me on that. However, this fact can bring about a troubling idea: Does the existence of evil prove that the God of the Bible is not real? The logical argument goes like this: If God is all powerful, then he cannot be all good – because he allows evil to exist and be done to us and to others. If God is all good, then he is not all powerful – because evil continues to exist, and he has not eradicated it from our world, let alone our lives. Therefore, the God of the Bible cannot be all powerful and all loving; he has to be made up.

While some people throw this down as a trump card to prove that Christianity is false, Jesus actually addresses the problem of evil quite succinctly in our parable from Matthew chapter 13. He uses another nature picture to illustrate what God is doing about evil and why he allows evil to persist. "Whoever has ears, let them hear." (verse 43b)

Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared." (verses 24-26) This specific kind of poisonous, fungal weed is called zizanium, or darnel, which can cause sickness if ingested. It looks just like wheat when first growing. As it matures, though, it stands straight up and tall while the real wheat droops because of the weight of the seeds.

Well, you got weeds. Why not just pull out the zizanium as soon as you can tell the difference, like the servants suggested? Because the zizanium intertwines its roots with the roots of the wheat. If you pull out the zizanium, you will pull out the wheat before it is fully mature and ready to be harvested, killing it, losing it. The solution to the zizanium - the poisonous, harmful weed problem - is then to let it grow together with the wheat until harvest time. Then separate them. Burn the weeds. Store the wheat in the barn.

What does this agricultural picture have to do with the problem of evil? Jesus tells us: "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." (verses 37-43)

Jesus' parable answers a whole lot for us regarding the problem of evil. First of all, he tells us where evil comes from. It doesn't come from God. It comes from the devil, the angel who rebelled against God, against God's rule, who wanted to make himself God. He tempted people. People chose to also rebel and disobey God, not keep his commands. Evil comes from the devil. Evil comes from us.

That's a hard truth, isn't it – that evil comes from us? We like to think of ourselves as basically good. Sure, we make some mistakes here and there, but we do more good than evil, right, more positive than negative? Also, the reason I was mean to that person, lost my temper, spoke bad about them is because they did it to me first. They hurt me, wronged me, did evil to me. I'm just reacting. But you and I – we didn't stop ourselves, did we? Out of our hurt, out of our anger, out of our desire to even the score, we lashed out. We responded to hurt by hurting. We responded to awfulness by being awful. We added to the evil in this world.

Why, then, doesn't an all powerful, all good God just get rid of all the evil people in this world? Because then there would be none of us left, and he actually wants us and all people to be saved from evil – evil done to us and the evil we ourselves do.

Instead of getting rid of us, getting rid of Adam and Eve when they brought the first sin to humankind, God saves us from the evil we have done and the evil done to us. Just like with the different soils from last week, God makes us good. He changes what we are. He takes us from unbelief to belief in him. He takes us from evil, rotten to the core person, to someone who is pure and holy. God takes our sinful nature, that evil we inherit, and he drowns it in the waters of baptism. He then makes us born again, new, fresh, renewed, covered with Jesus' perfect life, all the good things he did with no evil, no sin, whatsoever. God changes us from evil weeds to good wheat.

How can he do this? Because God himself being all powerful and all good decided not to simply destroy all us evil people. No, he came down from heaven and became one of us. After living a complete and perfect life, never thinking or doing any evil upon anyone, he offered himself on the cross. There, he took on all of our evil and the evil of the whole world. He paid the total price of all the awful things that we do to each other. He paid the price with his life, the life of an infinite God who had taken on human flesh for this very purpose – to pay the great and tremendous price of evil that we cannot get rid of. And he did this with no obligation to us. We brought evil into the world. This was our problem to fix. But we can't. God, in his love, fixes the problem of our evil by taking it on himself.

At the same time, love cannot be forced on anyone. In his goodness, God lets us reject him, reject his love for us that paid the tremendous price of our evil. But he gives us time here on earth to change us. Are we wheat? Are we weeds, zizanium? God, being all powerful, can and does actually change us while also allowing us to reject his loving work for us. He gives us until our judgment day or the Last Day of earth, the end of the age - whichever comes first – to be changed from weeds to wheat, from evil to good.

This is why God doesn't immediately destroy that person who hurt you, did evil upon you. He is giving that person time to be changed, to be saved, to be made pure and holy by what he has done – just like he did for you. He will not uproot that evil person until it is the harvest time, the right time for them to be judged, so that none of the wheat, none of the believers, none of the people of his kingdom, are ever lost.

But this doesn't stop the evil person from doing and committing evil upon me and you. Yes, you're right. This is why it's good to remember that God has already punished the evil done to you and me by suffering it himself on the cross. If people reject this, in the end, they will be weeded out. Everyone and everything that causes sin and all who do evil will be thrown "into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (verse 42) And we, the people of God's kingdom, people who have been changed by what God has done for us, "will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (verse 43) We get to live forever with God in his kingdom and will never again experience evil. Evil will never be done to us nor will we ever do any evil ever again.

In the meantime, even though we recognize a whole lot of evil in the world, hear also the two parables Jesus told in between the parable of the wheat and the weeds and its explanation. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a garden. It's the smallest of seeds and yet it becomes the largest of all the garden plants. The kingdom of heaven is also like the small, little yeast that when worked through 60 pounds of flour causes all of it to rise and expand. God's kingdom, people who believe in him, is ever expanding from something so small and becoming so big. More and more people are coming to faith in him every day, being changed from being weeds, that evil zizanium, to good wheat. We may not always see it – just like the difference between the young zizanium and wheat, but God's kingdom, his rule, is always increasing and always adding more people to it, more people who are saved and rescued from the evil of this world.

God is not a weak, impotent being who can't do anything about evil, and he does actually care about what it does to people, to us. In his wisdom, in his love, in his power, he took our evil upon himself. Instead of rooting us all out and destroying us, he gives us time to be changed, to become wheat, the people of his kingdom, to save us from evil. He gives that same time to all people who do evil, just like he did for us. So, we wait. Every day that passes and Judgment Day doesn't come, we trust that God's kingdom is ever expanding, that more weeds are becoming wheat, that more and more people are saved from evil. Thank you, God, for being so good and so powerful to change us and save us as many of us as possible from evil. Amen.