

Mt 13:24-30: Not now, but later: the kingdom is coming

Meditations on the parables #3

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Matthew 13:24-30: The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

Jesus told them another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

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?’

‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.

30 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.”

‘Where is God when we see so much evil in the world? Does he exist? And if he exists, why doesn’t he do anything about it?’

You have probably heard this objection against the Christian faith or maybe you think this way yourself. It seems to be the most successful objection against God’s existence in our time. When you are confronted with injustice, crime, or suffering, you discover how real this question is.

How you answer it makes a huge difference.

It is easy to use this question as an excuse to dismiss God altogether. Many have done this because they only look at what they see.

However, if God exists you must take into account what he has to say about it. Jesus, his son, has addressed this question long before World War 2 and other shocking events happened.

In the parable of the weeds he answers this question by revealing what God does about evil in the world.

Judgment and the punishment of evil – those things must have been on the minds of the disciples who were listening to Jesus.

The Old Testament had announced the kingdom of God in this way when it spoke about the coming of ‘the day of the Lord’. Every believer knew that this was going to be a day of revenge. Everyone who did evil was going to be punished.

The preaching of John the Baptist in the desert showed that it was drawing near. He prepared the people by calling them to repentance before that day came.

Not much later Jesus began preaching and it became clear that the kingdom was around the corner. His first words were: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” He was not just

another teacher but presented himself as the Son of God, the promised Messiah, who would establish God's kingdom on earth.

The disciples were like us: they expected God to do something about evil. And because Jesus was bringing God's kingdom they expected the judgment right then. They thought they could smell the fire already and expected to see the smoke billowing any second.

They were disappointed, however. Nothing like it was happening. Rather the opposite: Jesus' enemies were all too powerful. Resistance against him was mounting. When the judgment failed to materialize, but instead the opposition against Jesus grew disturbingly, there was reason for concern and even doubt. Was he really the Messiah? Had the kingdom come, or not?

Jesus answers these questions in three parables: this one about the weeds, and the two that follow: of the mustard seed and the leaven. In these three parables Jesus corrects wrong expectations about the kingdom. He explains how the kingdom of God grows and spreads on earth.

The parable starts with an ordinary situation: 'the kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed seed in his field.'

But right away Jesus adds an unusual element. The farmer has an enemy. This man is obviously trying to destroy the harvest. He cannot remove the seed, but he does something else: sowing weeds among the good seed.

This first part is not too difficult to understand. The farmer is Jesus preaching in Israel, sowing the seed of the kingdom.

The kingdom of God meets resistance. This is not surprising since the world had fallen into the hands of Satan. The first couple, Adam and Eve, gave in to temptation and delivered themselves and the world into his power. Since then, Satan's kingdom of darkness dominates the world.

Jesus expressly said: the owner of the field sowed good seed. He contrasts it with the weeds that the enemy would sow. The opposition against God's kingdom is foreign to creation: it does not belong there. Only God has a right to rule the world, because he created it. The world is meant to bring glory to God and we should submit our lives to his will and so serve his kingdom. Sin and rebellion came later; they are foreign powers that invaded God's world. Jesus drives them out and restores God's rightful rule.

The workers didn't notice anything at first. At first the weeds the enemy had sown looked exactly like grain. But once they grew taller and made heads, the difference became evident: the grain was yellow, the weeds had black heads. Imagine the surprise of the workers when they looked at the field one morning, and they saw all these black heads of the weeds everywhere between the grain! What a disaster!

They were surprised. But the owner immediately knew that it was the work of the enemy. The opposition against his kingdom is no surprise to God. His disciples should not be naïve and think that God's kingdom will not meet any resistance in this world. When God's Son Jesus came to earth he challenged Satan's power. Satan has raised the alert level to 'Red' and fights tooth and nail to retain his power on earth. No wonder the opposition is fiercer than ever when Jesus is on earth!

When this opposition becomes evident and the kingdom seems to be in danger, what is the solution?

The solution the workers have in mind is swift: 'Away with them! Remove the weeds immediately.' Then they can no longer pose a danger to the good seed that still has a long ways to go. The best way to get a pure harvest of grain is to remove the weeds right away.

This will be the effect when we wish that God would immediately destroy evil. He should wipe out all opposition from unbelievers right away, we reason. Victory is assured if God would deal with them immediately. How else is God's kingdom going to come?

The owner, however, has a different solution.

He knows that by now the roots of the weeds have spread out and become entangled with the roots of the good plants. He can already see it happen: his workers going through the fields, pulling the weeds out with a vengeance; they will probably pull out some of the grain as well. Note the care of the owner for the good seed. He does not want to lose a single plant. That is not Jesus' style. You can hear his love for the ones the Father has given to him. Not a single one of them will be lost, he will see to that.

But does this mean that evil will remain unpunished?

It seems like it when we look at the world. But the second part of this parable shows how wrong we are if we think like this.

The focus now shifts to the harvest.

Look at what happens: eventually the workers pull out the weeds and burn them. There will be punishment and retribution, only not right away. It happens at the end.

The owner does not disagree with his workers that the weeds need to be removed. They should not end up in his barn with the grain. Only their timing is wrong.

In the explanation Jesus gives of the parable the stress is on the final separation. Both will grow together until the harvest, and then they will be separated.

God will not leave evil unpunished. Judgment is coming; it has been scheduled on God's calendar, only not at the time we expect it.

When you know this, you should not be surprised or discouraged by the existence of evil in the world. It may seem to gain the upper hand. But God allows it to grow only until the harvest.

Then it will be destroyed. No doubt about it.

We learn the reason why he allows the opposition against his kingdom to continue in the world. The motive behind this is God's love for his children. He does not allow even one of them to be lost.

We can expect to see Satan's power on earth. He dominates unbelievers in such a way that they are willing instruments for his opposition against God's kingdom. However, Jesus does not leave his disciples alone.

While the children of God share the world with the children of the devil they can count on God's love and protection. Jesus asked this from God the Father in his prayer in John 17: "*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.*"

The fact that the weeds and the grain grow up together does in no way endanger the harvest. We live in a mixed world where the power of evil is evident, but Jesus will make sure that not a single believer will be missing from his harvest.

Listen how he describes what will happen on the day of the harvest. This receives most of the attention in the parable. The owner of the field instructed his workers to gather the weeds first and burn them. Only after that the grain should be gathered and brought into the barn. The Day of Judgment will mean the end of everything that causes sin and all who do evil. Those people will be punished in the fire.

Do you hear the message?

The owner of the field did not intend the weeds to become part of the harvest. His barn would only contain grain. He was going to separate the two at harvest time.

This parable is a serious warning for everybody who commits evil. You need to realize that evil in God's eyes is not limited to what we think of as evil. We think of murderers and other bad people. At the same time we think of ourselves as decent citizens who would not do anything like that.

God calls all opposition against his kingdom evil. Anyone who follows his own will and disregards God's commands opposes his kingdom. If you don't believe in Jesus Christ and don't follow him, you are outside of his kingdom. God calls you to repent from your sins and submit to him.

The parable is a solemn warning for evildoers. The weeds will be pulled out, separated from the grain, and burned in the fire. You may seem to get away with ignoring God and living life your way. Doing evil may seem to work for a while, but the destination of such people is the fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This fire of hell will punish for ever. Evildoers will have ample time to consider the choices they made; they will weep about their mistakes and gnash their teeth against God's justice and his grace they rejected.

What is terrifying for God's opponents, however, is a great comfort for believers. If you believe in Jesus you belong to the harvest Jesus is talking about. The grain did not seem to have a chance because of all the weeds, but the owner saved the grain by allowing both to grow.

Jesus gives believers the promise that he will keep them and will make them grow for his kingdom. On the day of harvest he will collect his grain and store it in his barn. He knew all along that he would reach his goal: getting a harvest from his field.

Listen to the beauty of the future Jesus promises to believers: "The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father". They will see the face of God and reflect his radiance, his beauty, and his pure light. On earth the beauty of the renewed lives of believers may not shine so brightly, because there is still sin in their lives and they live in a broken world. But after Jesus' return nothing will stop the radiance of God's glory in their lives; it will be complete.

With this parable Jesus directs your expectations about the kingdom. He concludes the explanation with the following words: 'He who has ears let him hear.'

Use your ears and not only your eyes. Don't be fooled by what you see with your eyes. Don't be impressed by evil powers that grow and take over. Instead, follow God's travel guide to recognize his kingdom and to become part of his harvest.