

Week 18

January 18, 2009

## Good Seed, Bad Seed

*Matthew 13:24-30*

Last week we looked at the previous parable from chapter 13 of Matthew: the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. Jesus compared the message of the kingdom of God to a seed planted in the soil of our hearts. That parable is all about the condition of the soil. Are we receptive, pregnable and fertile for the seed of God's good news to penetrate and catalyze growth and life.

This week, we see that Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. As you continue to read, it becomes apparent that the **man**, the spreader of seed, is the owner of the vineyard. The spreader and owner is likely Jesus himself (though it could be the Heavenly Father, both or either). The man in the story spreads good seed. The **good seed**, like last week, is the message of the kingdom of God. The **field** appears to be this world, God's world. There are other characters. There is an **enemy** who is Satan or any emissary of evil or untruth. That enemy plants **bad seed** which is untruth and evil. There are **servants**, who are us. And there are **harvesters** – God's angels (Matthew 24:31).

Here's the dilemma, the drama in the field: while the servants sleep, a creeping enemy spreads bad seeds – weeds – among the good seed. As the field grows, the wheat and the weeds grow up together. So as the wheat comes toward maturity and readiness for harvest, the weeds are also popping up.

The servants ask a legitimate question, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed? Where did these weeds come from?"

The landowner answers, "An enemy did this."

Ever helpful, the servants ask, "Should we go in and pull the weeds?"

"No," answers the owner, "while you're pulling up weeds, you might root up the good stuff. Let them both grow up together. Then we'll leave the harvesters with the hard task of separating and sorting."

This interesting story offers us some very clear messages. This is not one of Jesus' more oblique parables. There is no need for him to explain himself as he's done in the previous story. This one is absolutely clear. Let the good and bad grow up together and someone more able than me will do the separating and sorting. Leave the judgment of people – good and bad plants, wheat or weeds – to those who have the ability to sort without making grievous errors in judgment. Who has that ability? God's angels, only under the supervision of the landowner.

So if this parable is so clear, why is this message so hard? It's not as if the message of this story goes unsupported by other teachings from Jesus and the broader Bible. Just as Jesus says that "good and bad seed will grow up together," Proverbs 24:19 says, *do not fret because of evil men or be envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out*. In other words, relax. Be who you are and know that you can't change everyone or everything. One day God will take care of all of this.

One of the central messages of scripture is this: leave the judging to God. Be a realist about evil in the world. Observe it. Expect it. And steer clear from it. Help where you can. But don't spend yourself fretting. That's wasted energy. The owner will take care of it eventually. John 16:8 says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of its guilt. Paul tells the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 3:2-4) that we are destined for trials. John 16:33 says that *in the world you will have tribulation*, and all over his teachings Jesus indicates that his values and tactics will be counterculture in the greater portion of the world. The reason is clear in the whole of the Bible. God gives people free will, and some choose isolation and avoidance regarding God (they have no eyes to see nor ears to hear). Others pursue God or at least respond to God's overtures. This is true. It's real, and we have to deal with it. This is an imperfect world. The sooner we quit fretting the better.

More than mere fretting, Jesus says, *Do not judge or else you will be judged, and the measure you use to judge others will be used on you* (Matthew 7:1). Those are haunting words, not unlike the times when Jesus

seems to tell us that if we can't forgive, we're outside the stream of his forgiveness. In other words, if we can't give mercy, then we must not get mercy; therefore don't expect mercy. As Jesus said last week, *to him who has, more will be given, but to him who doesn't have, even what he has will be taken away*. That's a mysterious sentence, but it could have sweeping implications. He wants us to get it, and in getting it to give it. What is it? The good news of the kingdom of God, which is all about love and grace and mercy ... and, yes, truth, which is the truth about love and grace and mercy.

Romans 2:1 uses even stronger language. After pointing out the common desperation of humanity lost in sins of every type, Paul writes, *You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things*. By the way, the preceding passage that speaks of the common stain of human sin talks about everything from murder to gossip in the same breath, and those who disobey their parents in the same sentence as the heartless and ruthless. In other words, sin is sin, whether it's a capital offense or being boastful and arrogant.

The owner's servants are told not to pull up the weeds. Why? Because we are too clumsy. We are ignorant and shallow and altogether too ill-informed to make any accurate judgment about the eternal welfare of another person. We don't know. God knows. Romans 14:10 and following says, *You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat ... each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way*.

Someone could easily argue, "Paul is writing to Christians urging Christians not to judge Christians." And in that specific context, it's true. But everywhere in scripture, we hear a common strain of thought: don't play God. Don't pretend you are the judge or that you have enough knowledge to judge.

One more legitimate retort: "But aren't there some things that **should** rile us up? Aren't there evils and untruths that we need to warn our children against, and aren't there things we should hold each other accountable to, and shouldn't we be salt and light and ambassadors for God's kingdom values in an ugly and broken world?"

Yes. There are things that should rile us up. Like injustice visited on the poor, or the widow, or the orphan, or the disabled or the imprisoned. The whole counsel of scripture and the teachings of Jesus make all of this very clear. Moved by compassion, we should rise up in defense of the defenseless. We should be riled up whenever the underdog is ill-treated. But that's so much different than getting riled up because the world acts like the world, and foaming and fretting about the inconvenience that godless people create for us.

How would Jesus view the person who's tailgating me? While I get tempted to slow down on purpose and harass that person and instigate even more road rage, Jesus would probably pull over and say a prayer for that person's sanity and safety. I don't know that person's story, but I know that Jesus does. And knowing that changes me, if I let it.

Lately, Christians seem to be so angry about the gay lifestyle. How would Jesus view the person who seems to be allergic to heterosexual relationships? While we're tempted to foam and rage because "they're not doing it right!", Jesus knows every story and every person by name. He knows the shameful things done in the dark that have been at worst abusive and at best monumentally confusing. He sees the pain and the disorientation and does not condemn but grieves and reaches out and offers grace and the prospect of actual healing. He does not call wrong right or right wrong, but he calls all of us broken and desperate and ultimately hopeless without his redemptive touch.

So how do I know when I'm outraged for the right reasons or the wrong reasons? The test is simple. Is love your guide? Is someone that you care for deeply suffering because of this or that? Is it self-righteous anger moving your passion, or is it righteous anger? If it's righteous, then your heart, moved by love, is swelling with passion and a hunger to actually help.

But what about the world around us? Who holds them accountable?

God does.

But aren't we salt and life? Yes, by how we live.

But shouldn't we be campaigning for a righteous nation? To the degree that God and our founders have blessed us with a small share in the rule of this country, we should exercise it well with strong and good-spirited advocacy. We have a voice, and we have a vote. As we find and exercise both privileges, please balance that with the knowledge that Jesus barely wasted a word on the Roman Empire – the United States of that day. And he said a lot more about the state of our hearts and the influence that a tsunami of love and mercy could bring to the planet.

But what if our country is in grievous error?

Then grieve and let that grief find the right audience and the right tone, a spirit that represents Jesus well. Know who it is that you are advocating or defending, and stand in the gap out of a heart of love.

But I'm defending God, God's will and God's way! There we go again – poodles guarding the fortress. To the best of my knowledge, God never asked us to defend him; rather he asked us to reflect him.

But what about the church? Maybe we don't judge each other, but don't we keep accountability regarding lifestyle and doctrine!

Yes, we do. And the spirit of God's instruction is clear. When you go to correct a faith sibling, do it in love and humility. Spend some quality time looking in the mirror. Make sure that your lifestyle and motives aren't hypocritical. Make sure that your ways are gentle and that restoration, not condemnation, is the goal. And seek reconciliation whenever possible.

Oh, the damage done by angry, judgmental religion. We have all been so discredited by that dark and hard spirit; and that, by the way, is one thing that really got Jesus riled up. He hated it when his father's heart got misrepresented by bad religion.

And oh, the damage that's been done whenever we have weakened the church by making her a political instrument for extremists on the right or the left. Whenever we've played that game, we have relinquished our good standing and shot ourselves in the foot with a self-inflicted misappropriation of our witness. When we feel disempowered, we too often talk and act like whiners and victims. And when we feel empowered, power corrupts us, and we end up doing harm with our glib sense of right.

We are called to make disciples, to reach and teach, to shine like lights and to salt the earth with a unique and influential way of living that always has been and always will be a gentle indictment of the cruel and the crass. But we love them, all of them, however cruel and however crass, and we are never granted permission to dismiss them from their surging potential to be our fellow heirs in heaven.

So what do we do? We sow and water, and sometimes we get to reap in obvious ways. We love and we serve and we believe like children, and sometimes we stand up and cry out on behalf of justice for the oppressed. We walk humbly with God and respectfully with others, and sometimes they will say to us, "I want what you have. I need what you have. Tell me about your God."

And we're ready to give a reason for the unique qualities in our lives: unusual hope and overflowing love and a bent always toward mercy.