

Time of Grace Ministry
Jesus' Growth Plan for Me: Why Jesus Allows Bad People Among Us
Matthew 13:24-29
September 25, 2022

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A few years ago, one of my daughters asked me a seemingly simple but actually very complicated question. We were all carrying buckets, wearing our gardening gloves, going around our property, trying to stop the weeds from their hostile takeover plans. And I was a few feet away from my daughter, and she called me over, and her question was this, "Dad, is this a weed?" Now, at this point in my life, I had pulled a lot of weeds. I actually spent more than a decade of my working career on a grounds crew, so I had planted hundreds of plants, I had pulled thousands of -- maybe, tens of thousands of weeds. This was the question I was very trained to answer, but when I walked over to her and I looked, I wasn't exactly sure. So I looked a little bit closer, and then I raised my voice, and I called into the house, "Kim, Is this a weed?" Because it's difficult sometimes, isn't it? I mean, some weeds, obviously, look like weeds, and some plants, obviously, look like plants. But sometimes the difference between the two isn't as obvious, and sometimes that makes our job of judging between one or the other pretty difficult.

So, why am I telling you this? I'm telling you this because I have a hunch that a lot like me, you want to keep things that are good and get rid of things that are bad. As you think about our world, maybe the church you attend, the community you're a part of, as you think about schools, and governments, and police forces, I bet you share my same desire to keep those who are good and to get rid of those who are bad. Maybe you've felt the same way when it comes to social media. If you're a Christian, have you ever seen someone who claims to be a Christian on their social media feed, and then they say the most offensive non-Christian things? Like, you open their profile picture and there's Bible passages, and crosses, and Jesus, and there's crazy dropping bombs, rude political commentary, and you cringe, right? Because this embarrasses the name of God, it misuses his name, it makes it harder for real Christians to reach real people with some really good news.

And when you see that you start to think, "I just wish we could get rid of the bad ones and keep the good ones." And that's everywhere, right? When it comes to teachers in kids' classrooms, we want to keep the good ones and out with the bad ones. When it comes to law enforcement, and the legal system, and judges, and the government, and who represents our nations, we want to keep the good ones, get rid of the bad ones. We all share that same passion. But as I found out with my daughter that day, it's not always as easy as you might think. We'd love to keep the good ones and get rid of the bad ones, but the difference between the good ones and the bad ones isn't as clear-cut as you might assume. Now, the fact is, weeds don't raise their hands; they don't identify themselves so you can quickly pull them. Sometimes, they blend in and that's what makes the job difficult.

Yeah, and that's true, even when it comes to faith. Like, if you were the one who got to judge the living and the dead, if Jesus, the Son of God, handed you his gavel and said, "Go for it. You decide who makes it, who doesn't, who's bound for heaven, who's bound for hell." How confident would you feel? And remember, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." It's tough, right? It forces you to ask my daughter's question. "Is this one of your children, God, or is this not?"

Sometimes, the difference is obvious, but many times, it's anything but. And that situation, it's frustrating because it means we live in this mixed-up world. It means there's always another headline, there's always another hypocrite, there's always a problem that we deeply want to fix. As hard as we work, we never quite get to this place that's full of goodness and wholeness like we want. And I think that's why Jesus told this story. Two thousand years ago, in Matthew chapter 13, Jesus told a parable, a really short story about this very issue. And so, when you feel frustrated, when you feel confused, when you really don't know what to do to fix the problem of this world, maybe this is the story that you need to read. I'm excited it to share with you.

It comes from Matthew chapter 13, it starts in verse 24, and here's what it says, "Jesus told them another parable: '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.'"

One day, apparently, Jesus said a good man put good seed into a good field, but then, and cue the sinister music, his enemy showed up, and under the cover of darkness, he did a very dark thing. He reached into his pouch, and he sowed right on top of the seeds of wheat, weeds. In particular, in the original Greek of the New Testament, he sowed something called 'darnel'. Have you heard of that before? D-A-R-N-E-L. Darnel was a weed that was greatly feared by first century farmers because of its uncanny resemblance to wheat. Once they were full-grown and the heads had formed, one would turn brown and the other would turn black; they were easy to separate, but until that point, this weed and the good wheat were nearly identical twins.

You can almost hear Israeli children, like my daughter, asking, "Dad, is this a weed?" And even an experienced Israeli farmer was not sure of the difference. "The owner's servants came to the owner 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? Right? We got to do something. The good is mixed with the bad, sir, we need to do something. This is a bad situation.' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 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.'"

Essentially, the owner says, "Just wait. I know you're mad, I know you're frustrated, I know this is difficult, but just wait. If you try now, you're not going to do it well, you're not going to do it perfectly, so just wait. The time will come, and I will send my harvesters, and they are good at their job. They will bundle up every last weed and get rid of it. And they will also gather together

every last stalk of wheat and save it. Not one of the good seeds that I planted in the ground will be lost, so just wait."

"Then Jesus 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.' So, Jesus answered, 'The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man,'" that's Jesus. "The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom" Christians who recognize Jesus as their king. "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 of 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. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Now, I'm not sure if I've ever said this in a sermon before, but when I stood up to talk to you today, I wasn't and I'm probably still not a hundred percent sure how to apply this parable. It's kind of a bad thing to say. My job as a pastor is to study the word, to figure out exactly what it means, and to share that meaning with you, but this -- this is one of the few times where I'm really -- I'm not sure. And here's why. Because there are other Bible passages that say, "Don't wait." Right? If there's hypocrisy, there are pastors that say, "Address it." If someone is sinning, Jesus, in Matthew 18 says, "Here's the process to deal with it." Imagine if a child was being abused. We wouldn't say, "Well, just wait." No, we would do something, we would judge someone, we would call good "good," and bad "bad". We'd try to bring justice to the world.

So, it's difficult for me to figure out, like, "Jesus, what do you want Christians to do with this? Just wait because you're the only one who can judge rightly? Do you want us to jump in and just do our best?" And I'm going to keep thinking about this and maybe you can too, the line between doing nothing and doing too much. So, I'm not a hundred percent sure about that, but I do think there are two things I can say with confidence from this text; two lessons that you and I can learn. The first lesson: Be cautious. The second lesson: Be comforted.

Alright, let's start with that first one, be cautious. If you're a follower of Jesus, you might have all the best intentions to rid the holy Christian Church of hypocrisy, alright? Real Christians repent of their sin and they believe in Jesus. And when you sense that someone doesn't, especially the repentance part, you, like the servants, say, "We have to get rid of this. This is dangerous for the church. It's going to choke out good faith. It could be fatal for someone if they come in contact with one of these fake Christians." And that's a good passion, God hates hypocrisy too. But here's the problem. In your passion, you might rip out one of God's people, because the difference between God's people and other people isn't always as obvious as we'd like. If Christian people like me never sinned, if we always did the right thing, if we were like this glowing, brilliant, holy wheat, then it would be easier, but I'm not. And if non-Christians never did anything good, if they were always violent, always cruel, always mean, then it would be easier to tell the difference, but they're not. They're often kind, hospitable, gentle, generous.

And so, if you and I go on this crusade to rid the world of bad people, to rid the church of bad people, we might get it wrong. And so Jesus says, "Woah, woah, woah. Be cautious."

Makes me think of a conversation I had with a woman years ago. When I was a brand-new pastor back in Madison, Wisconsin, I had a conversation with a member of our church whose behavior was concerning to me. She was living with her boyfriend; she was sleeping with her boyfriend. I was just concerned that she was thinking of herself before the commandments of God, and so, I found the courage to talk to her about it. And sitting in her living room, I was trying to listen, share passages, explain my concern, and I remember feeling confused. Like my daughter asked, "Is this a weed?" I kept asking myself, "Is this a Christian?" And at some points in the conversation, she seemed very repentant. Yeah, she had broken God's commandment, but she was struggling, and she was weak, and she wanted to do the right thing, and I heard that coming out of her heart. And then, like a minute later, she didn't seem repentant, she seemed flippant. Like, "Yeah, nobody's perfect. I'm human. Now what's the big deal?" As if her sin, the sin that put Jesus on the cross was no big deal. And I'm sitting there in her living room with my Bible trying to figure out. What do I do? I mean, do I call her out? Do I warn her that she might kind of look like a Christian but she's not a child of God if she doesn't care at all about the commandments of God? Do I comfort her saying, "Hey, we all struggle. I struggle, you struggled. Jesus died for people who are struggling."

I didn't know what to say. And I remember leaving, getting in my car, saying to God, "God, can you just put a meter on people's foreheads?" That's the problem that you and I have and why we need to be cautious, because we can't see into the human heart. I could see little bits of her behavior, but I couldn't see the whole story, and neither can you. And you might think someone is a fake Christian, but the point is you see .001% of their behavior. You are totally unable to eavesdrop on the silent conversations that they have with God, the "I'm sorry" that they say in their prayers. You might see their behavior on a Friday or a Saturday night and just assume, "Dude, this guy is not in." But you don't see the morning after when they grieve their sin and they ask Jesus for forgiveness. And so, Jesus' message is, "Be cautious." We're still going to have real conversations in the living room, but be cautious. Be cautious that you don't rush to do a job that only angels can do very well. Be cautious.

And second, be comforted. The story admittedly, is very intense. Jesus is talking about Judgement Day, people being thrown into the blazing furnace, weeping, gnashing of teeth. You might not have felt much comfort by the time you got to the end of it, but did you catch the heart of the farmer in the story? The one who represents Jesus himself? His servants wanted to get rid of all the bad things, the bad people, but he wouldn't let them, and do you remember why? He said, "Because you may uproot the wheat." You may. There's a chance. It's not certain, he didn't say, "You will." He said, "You may. You might take out one of the good ones." In other words, this farmer was unwilling to lose a single good one. Or to put it more personally, Jesus is unwilling to lose a single one of us. The truth is my life and your life, it doesn't always look as good as we wish, right? We would love to be such bright lights in a dark world, distinct, different, that people would look at us and say, "How do you do that? Oh, my goodness, there's no one like you. You're the nicest neighbor, you're the best."

But that doesn't always happen to me. Sometimes they argue, and we argue with them. Sometimes they push to get what they want, and we push right back. Sometimes they panic like they don't believe in God because they don't, and sometimes we panic like we don't believe in God even though we do. Like weeds and wheat, the difference isn't always obvious, and yet -- this is such good news. And yet, if there were Christians who wanted to rip you out of the kingdom, Jesus would not let them.

"Just wait," he says to his church, "because you may uproot the wheat. And I can't stand -- I will not allow a single one of my children to be lost. They might not be the best wheat in town. They might not look all that different from the weeds themselves, but this is a child of God that I have planted, and I will not let you rip him out of my hands." No, Jesus said, "The Son of Man will send out his angels, they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all that do evil. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." Whew! Just wait. Jesus will send his angels on the Judgement Day. He will gather up you, and me, and his whole Christian church, and we will shine. We will be as different as God intended, like the sun itself in the kingdom of God, the feast, the place where we will be safe forever, and ever, and ever.

But some of you are thinking, "But Pastor Mike, no, you just read -- Jesus just said that he would weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin, and I sometimes cause people to sin. And he will weed out of his kingdom all who do evil. Do you know who has done evil? Me, and all means all, right? So, I'm not going to shine like the sun, I'm not going to make it." And I would say to you, "Deep breath." Now, let me give you some really, really good Greek. You might know, the New Testament that Jesus' words were recorded in was written by Matthew in Greek, and the phrase, "All who do evil," is not just someone who occasionally does evil or sins, it literally means "All who continually practice evil. All who constantly live a lifestyle with no repentance, no remorse, no sorrow, no 'I'm sorry, God.' No 'Please, forgive me, God.' And that's not me, and I'm guessing that's not most of you.

Righteous. Are you and I righteous? We've done so many wrong things; we don't always choose what's right, but do you remember what the Bible says about how to be righteous? Listen to these words from the apostle Paul. He said, in Romans 3: "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law." So, if you thought by works, by doing, by your moral resume. No, Paul says, it doesn't work that way for anyone. Instead, he says, "The righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

Reminds me of the day I was stuck at an airport in New York. I say stuck for a reason. All the passengers were there waiting at the gate, trying to get home and sleep in our own beds, and the airline was not giving us any good news. If any of us had known just how many delays there would be in the process, my goodness, we would not have complained that much after the first one. I'm telling you, it was brutal. I mean, people stretched, they laid down on the uncomfortable floor, they went for their fifth bathroom break, passengers were exhausted, they vented at the front desk. Kids were uncomfortable, ornery, crying; the parents didn't know what to do, they had used up all of their options, like, we were done with this. And then, we waited again, and then we had to wait some more, and then another announcement, and more bad news. But

eventually, when everything was ready and the time had come, they opened the gate, we got on the plane, and we made it home.

According to Jesus, that's life. And sometimes it feels like we're stuck in an airport. It's uncomfortable, it's hard, there's crying, there's pain, but Jesus says, "I know, just wait. I am coming soon, and I will send out my angels, and everything bad we will get rid of. And everyone that I have made good, we will gather together. And then, with Father, Son, and Spirit, we will shine like the stars in the sky as the feast begins."

You might not see it just yet, but believe Jesus. Just wait. Let's pray.

Dear Holy Spirit, we ask you today for patience, for endurance, for perseverance. Every single day, people see the brokenness and the pain of this world, and we are tempted to question if you're there, if you're powerful, if you know, if you can do anything about it, and especially the question, if you love. You do.

You are reaching out to those people who haven't crossed over from darkness to light, from unbelief to faith, and so, I pray that you would give your church patience to wait. May we grieve the sin that we see in this world, and may we wait in confidence and hope that your word is true, that you are coming soon, and you will make all things new.

We ask for this faith, for this patience, because we need your help, God. Give it to us that we may wait until that day comes when we see your glorious face. I pray this all, Jesus, in your name, Amen.