

The Wheat and the Weeds

And the Parable of the Dragnet

The parable of the wheat and the weeds only appears in the Gospel of Matthew. Let's take a look at the parable:

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away (Matthew 13:24-25)

In the ancient world, when there were rivalries between farmers, they would sometimes sow harmful seeds in the field of their enemy. Though Roman law prohibited this, it still happened. The weeds (*tares* in some translations) referred to here were likely darnel—a poisonous weed which is related to the wheat family and grows plentifully in Syria and Palestine. In its early stages of growth, darnel resembles wheat; though it's easy to distinguish between the two later, as darnel produces a smaller ear.



So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' (Matthew 13:26-28)

No one noticed that the man's enemy had sown the darnel until months later, when the plants came up and bore grain. It was at that time that the weeds appeared, and until then it hadn't been obvious that the wheat and weeds were growing together.

So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:28-30)

The master of the house recognizes that his enemy has sowed the weeds, and also knows that any effort to pull out the darnel plants at this stage would damage the wheat as well, since their roots would be completely intertwined. Instead, he decides that when the time of harvest comes, the harvesters will do the laborious task of harvesting twice, first gathering the darnel and then the wheat. The darnel will be bound in bundles to be burned, probably as fuel. The wheat will be gathered and put into the barn.



Jesus didn't give an explanation of this parable to the crowds, but later He explained it to His disciples.

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:36-40)



The expression “sons of...” in this sort of context is a familiar phrase in Hebrew or Aramaic, meaning “someone who belongs to.” Let’s take a look at the differences within the parable between the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one.

The sons of the kingdom were sown by the sower (Jesus), God is described as “their Father,” they are called “righteous,” and they will “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” In contrast, the sons of the evil one are “sown by the enemy” (the Devil), called “lawbreakers,” or in other translations, “those who do evil,” and the end result for them is described as being “thrown in a fiery furnace” where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”



Through this parable, Jesus was dealing with a mystery of the kingdom.

The Jewish expectation was that the Messiah would separate the wheat from the chaff in order to establish a pure community. Jewish writings of the day spoke of the expectation that the Messiah would purge Jerusalem of Gentiles, drive out sinners, gather a holy people, and be intolerant of the unrighteous. None of these things were happening in Jesus’ ministry, yet He was proclaiming the kingdom’s presence.

According to Jesus, the Jewish expectation was incorrect. Good and evil would continue on side by side within the world. Evil would not be purged from humanity until the close of the age, the Day of Judgment. The imagery Jesus uses for the weeds is of them being thrown into a fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This imagery for hell comes from the Hebrew word Gehenna, which was originally the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned. It was used as a symbol of the wicked and their future destruction.

By contrast, the imagery for the fate of the wheat that is gathered into the barn of the landowner is one of glory. The language reflects Daniel 12:3:

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

This parable focuses on the final judgment. It tells us that sons of the kingdom and sons of the evil one coexist in this world and that it will remain that way until the Day of Judgment. While the kingdom had come into the world through Jesus' ministry, it didn't come in its fullness. Both good and evil cohabit this world, but in the future those who are evil and the causes of evil will be cast out—and at that time, the fullness of God's kingdom will be present.



We see a similar message given in the parable of the dragnet, which Matthew includes just a few verses later.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50)

Jesus was referring to fishing with what today is called a seine net. This type of net can be deployed from a boat or used from the shore. It has cork floats along the top and lead weights along the bottom. It can be stretched out between two boats or laid out from one and then pulled to shore by ropes. Everything in its path is caught as it's pulled in.



This type of net doesn't discriminate between fish, so any of the twenty-four known species of fish found in the Sea of Galilee could have been caught. Once on the shore, the fish would be sorted. While fishermen in general sort their catch between edible and inedible fish, Jewish fishermen needed to further differentiate according to their dietary laws, which forbade the

consumption of certain edible fish.

Of all that are in the waters you may eat these: whatever has fins and scales you may eat. And whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you. (Deuteronomy 14:9–10)

The good fish, those that were clean, were put into containers, perhaps baskets or crates; while the bad fish, those which were unclean, were thrown away.

While the parable of the wheat and weeds speaks about the righteous shining like the sun, as well as the fate of the lawbreakers, this parable focuses solely on the destiny of the evil or wicked. In telling this parable, Jesus was saying there will be a separation process and that judgment will occur. At that specific time, the end of the age, evil will be excluded from God's kingdom.

Judgment isn't a popular topic, and it has wrongly been used as a scare tactic by some within the body of Christ, both past and present. But however much we might not like the concept, future judgment is a reality, and it is precisely the reason Jesus came to earth and sacrificed His life for all of us.

Every human being deserves judgment because of our sin, which separates us from God. God doesn't want that separation, but because He is complete holiness, nothing unholy can be in His presence. However, because of His love for humanity, He made a way for us to be redeemed and pronounced pure—through Jesus' death on the cross bringing forgiveness of our sins.





The imagery of a fiery furnace and a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth used within both of these parables is just that—imagery. It shouldn't be taken literally that the afterlife for those who reject the message of the gospel will be one of flames and burning. However, whatever the exact circumstances will be, it will be a separation from God and from those who love God. When we consider all the things that God is—love, beauty, goodness, mercy, holiness, kindness, justice, righteousness, trustworthiness, and so much more—thinking of being in a place where the things that God is are not present because He is not present is harrowing.



People need God. He doesn't want anyone to perish but rather, as the apostle Peter wrote, desires that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9) We who have experienced the love and mercy of God have been asked to share the news of God's love with others, and when we do, we bring them the opportunity to be in company with those who will eternally be in a place that is full of all that God is. May we do our best to share God's love and message with others.

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