

What to Do With the Weeds

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 13:24-30

“Sir didn’t you sow good seed in your field?! Where then did all these weeds come from?!” Now there’s a question. In my pastoral work, I probably get asked this question more than any other. In my own moments of perplexity, I probably ask this question more than any other. “Sir didn’t you sow good seed in your field?! Where then did all these weeds come from?!” Of course, it’s not really an agricultural question at all, is it? It’s the question the problem of evil. It’s an agricultural version of the question, ‘Lord if you are good, why is there so much evil in the world.’ Christians have been whispering, shouting, muttering, groaning this question for thousands of years. It’s the question of the heartbroken wife, sitting in bed alone after her husband has announced that he’s leaving and he wants a divorce. It’s the anguished question of the Nigerian Christian picking up the pieces after Fulani tribesman have ravaged their village. It’s the question of the addict pounding his fist in the kitchen table after succumbing to temptation yet again. Lord! Didn’t you sow good seed in your field?! Where then did all these weeds come from?” Is there anyone here who hasn’t asked this question at some point? Of course there isn’t. We all have weeds in our fields.

This morning, with the help of Jesus’ wise and wonderful story, we are going to reflect on the question of why there are so many weeds in the field of a good God. We’ll do that by hearing the master’s answers to his servant’s questions. The servants ask two questions in this parable, one in verse 27 and one in verse 28. They are two questions we human beings have always asked about the weeds, namely: Where did these weeds come from? And how do we deal with them?

First, where did these weeds come from? That’s the question of verse 27. *“Master, didn’t you sow good seed in this field?” “Lord, did these weeds come from you? Is this your doing? Did you plant these evil weeds that are choking my life?”* The master’s answer is clear and firm. *“An enemy did this.”* I am not the author of evil. I am not the one bringing these weeds. I did not sow the holocaust. I do not decree murder and divorce and depression and addiction. An enemy does those things. I am the author of good, not evil. I am light and in me is no darkness at all.

Not only is the master’s answer really clear, it’s also really short. And that’s too bad, because his answer leaves a lot of questions. Namely: *“OK master, you’re not the author of evil. But in the rest of this book you say that you are completely in control of this world. The rest of this book shows me that you are sovereign, and not a hair can fall from my head without you. Sovereign Lord, I’m relieved to know that the weeds aren’t from you, but you see everything, you know everything before it happens! So why are you letting the enemy do this. Almighty God, why did you let the enemy sow those weeds?”* Those questions aren’t answered in the rest of the parable. I would say that those questions aren’t answered in the rest of the Bible. When it comes to our questions about the weeds, instead of an answer the Bible holds up those two truths but doesn’t show you how they fit together. The Bible tells us that the master didn’t plant the weeds; he’s all good, he’s all love, he’s all light. AND the Bible tells us that the master is in control of all things, that all things come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand (to quote the catechism). It holds both these things up as fundamental truths. But it doesn’t completely resolve

the tension between them. God's 'answer' to this tension is to say, something like, *"I am in control, AND, the weeds are not from me. I know this is hard for you to understand, but trust me. I love you."* That brings us to the second question that we servants ask in this parable, and that's: what do we do about the weeds? How do we live in a world full of weeds? Of course, that's not exactly how they ask the question in verse 28. The servants think they already know how to deal with the weeds: *"Do you want us to go and pull them up?"* they say. It seems like a logical course of action. If the weeds are causing problems, yank the weeds. Surely that's what the master wants! Wherever we meet these evil weeds in the world, in our neighborhoods, in ourselves, we should pull up those weeds! But the farmer says, 'No.' He tells his servants, *"Let the wheat and the weeds grow together."* *"Wait, what?! You don't want us to uproot the weeds!?! Don't you want us to fight evil? Do you just want us to let sin run rampant in the world while we watch? Master, why don't you want us to uproot the weeds?!"*

Because sometimes it's hard to distinguish the weeds from the wheat. You see, the seed the enemy has sown in the farmer's field is not just any old seed; it's almost certainly something called Darnel, a particularly nasty weed. It's particularly nasty because it's hard to tell the difference between darnel and wheat. Darnel germinates about the same time as wheat. It grows at about the same rate. When Darnel is young it looks almost exactly the same as the wheat. It is not until the darnel is ripe, it is not until it forms heads, that you can tell the difference. And by that time the roots of the wheat and the weeds are dangerously intertwined and in your zeal to uproot the weeds, you can do real damage to the wheat. So Jesus warns us against overzealous weeding.

There is so much wisdom here. There are two errors that we can make when it comes to dealing with evil. On the one hand we can be complacent. We can simply give in to evil. We can tell ourselves that we are being big-hearted and open-minded and look the other way. That's not the answer. That's not what Jesus is suggesting with this story. The Bible is massively clear that God wants us to resist the devil and flee from him. *"Hate evil, and cling to what is good,"* says Paul in Romans 12. In the parable right before this, the parable of the sower, Jesus tells us to be good soil and warns us against falling away. So complacency, doing nothing in the face of evil is a mistake.

But this parable reminds us that it is also possible to go too far in the other direction. When we are overzealous in our prosecution of evil, we can cause great harm. We say, *"I am a warrior against the weeds! Down with the weeds!"* And we go out into the world boldly uprooting the weeds, only to find that the wheat is being destroyed. History is littered with examples of this sort of over-zealous gardening. The Spanish Inquisition. The Salem witch trials. The crusades. Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a group of crusaders who were filled with a zeal for righteousness. They went through an Arab town with their swords drawn. Destroy the weeds! Destroy these servants of the evil one. They killed everyone in sight. It wasn't until after they turned the bodies over that they found crosses hanging around the necks of these dark-skinned people. *"Master do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?"* *"No. Because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them."* Yes, the work of fighting evil requires diligence and determination and intention, but it also requires humility. We're not that smart. Our vision is not that clear. We see through a glass darkly. We get the weeds and the wheat mixed up, and we cause harm.

This doesn't just happen in large scale events, like crusades and inquisitions; our excessive zeal for uprooting causes harm in the small, domestic places of our lives too. It usually shows itself as some sort of perfectionism. Perfectionism is a great example of what Jesus warns

against in this parable. Perfectionism happens when you are overly obsessed with getting rid of every last weed in your own field and in all the fields around you. It is a problem, and it causes great harm. The big, successful church wants every part of its ministry to be excellent. It wants the highest quality music. It wants top notch preaching. Services are meticulously planned. Everything in the worship service flows and fits together. Guest musicians are premier quality. Guest preachers are preaching all-stars. But in their zeal for perfection the church unintentionally sends the message that maybe there isn't room for imperfection here. Their zeal for excellence obscures the message of grace. The zeal for perfection uproots something central.

The zeal for perfection can infect parenting. Most of you know that, in the last generation there has been a documented increase in anxiety among young people. The New York Times reports, "In 1985, the Higher Education Research Institute at U.C.L.A. began asking incoming college freshmen if they "felt overwhelmed by all I had to do" during the previous year. In 1985, 18 percent said they did. By 2010, that number had increased to 29 percent. Last year, it surged to 41 percent." Many of experts suggest that part of the reason for this problem is over-zealous parenting. Engaged parents who sincerely love their children, run ahead of them to make sure that every obstacle in their child's way will be uprooted. Their child will never experience a bully, their child will never be in a situation where they feel unsafe or uncomfortable; even mediocre teachers will be uprooted from their child's path. But when parents work so hard to protect their child from failure, their child gets the message that failure is not an option, failure must be the worst thing in the world, and so you get a whole generation of anxious, high-achieving perfectionists. Lynn Lyons, an expert on youth anxiety puts it this way: "Anxiety is all about the avoidance of uncertainty and discomfort," Lyons explained. "When we play along, we don't help kids learn to cope or problem-solve in the face of unexpected events." In an effort to uproot trouble from our children's lives, we uproot their confidence.

The earnest church member is determined to follow Jesus. He wants to be a model Christian. He is determined to please God in all things. But then he falls. In a moment of weakness he commits a serious sin. He confesses to God and he asks God for forgiveness, but he is so mad at himself, he is so ashamed of his hypocrisy that he won't stop berating himself up. He keeps going back to the sin and berating himself. He starts hating himself, cursing himself, even damning himself. In his zeal to uproot this one sin, he uproots his sense that he is a beloved child of God saved by grace. His zeal for perfection drown out the voice of the Lord saying to him, "*You are my child! I love you!!*"

It's really hard to keep our balance here. It is so hard to be both a person who is serious in our fight against sin AND who lives with the patience and grace. It's hard to be a person who's both strong against evil AND who knows when to practice forbearance and patience and gentleness and the other virtues that we need to live with imperfections. Most of us don't get the balance right. Sometimes we're too hard on sin, sometimes we are too easy. Fortunately this is the master's farm, not ours. We servants may not be able to distinguish wheat from weeds, but he can. He has the skill and the patience to clean this field. And he will make it clean. That's the promise of this parable. When the harvest comes every pesky weed in us, every bad habit, every dark temptation, every enslaving addiction, and every twisted part of us will be removed from us and our field will be new and clean. When the harvest comes, every weed will be uprooted from our hearts; every weed will be uprooted from the world.

How will the farmer do this? He doesn't say exactly how in this parable, but if we keep our eyes on the man telling the parable we will see soon enough. Because the master has sent his one and only son into the field. This son will walk out into the middle of the field, out into the

weediest part and plant himself there. On the cross Jesus lets himself be planted in the thorny thicket of human sin. The weeds will encircle him, they will choke him, and they will drag him down to the grave. But there in the ground, he deals a mortal blow to evil's roots. His blood is like cosmic weed-killer. He destroys sin and death. He destroys sin's power at the root. Already now the power of Satan is breaking. When the master returns for harvest, the last weed will burn away, his field will shine like Eden in the morning sun, and all things shall be made new.

May the master bless and keep all of us servants as we go out into his fields this week. May we be fierce against sin. May we overflow with patience and grace. May we know when to uproot. May we know when to wait. And may we all be gathered safely in when the harvest comes.

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