

Reflection: Wheat & Weeds

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43**

We often think of Matthew 13 as ‘parable central.’ Today’s parable is the second of seven parables Jesus told in quick succession.

The lectionary includes the parable itself and Jesus’ interpretation, but the interpretation follows a break in between. Sometimes, pastors ignore the interpretation, preferring to examine only the parable. But not today.

There are at least two points of interest in this parable, which are: the enemy and the weeds.

Matthew tells us in advance that an enemy – literally *the hostile one* – came and sowed weeds among the wheat. The big question is, *who* would do this, and a related question is, *why* would they want to? Matthew doesn’t say, so the focus of the story must be on the weeds and the wheat.

The farmer’s reaction is interesting. We know the enemy did it, but he automatically *assumes* that an enemy did it because he *knows* that he sowed good seed. This leads us to ask another question: do farmers have enemies? Or is it easier for him to blame an enemy for his misfortune (or his mistake) than it is to chalk it up to bad luck?

The main thing to talk about, then, is the weeds sown by the enemy. This kind of weed is called a ‘mimic weed,’¹ and it is known by many names, including *cheat* and *drunk* and *poison rye grass*. Its more common first-century name is *darnel*, which is what Matthew calls it in the parable. It was and still is regarded as one of the ‘worst weeds in the world.’²

It’s a nasty plant for several reasons. It has close similarities to wheat; they share synchronous growing times; and the two plants can only be distinguished at maturity when they diverge.

Jesus knew all this, and it doesn’t sound all that bad.

The problem is that darnel reduces the health of the wheat crop in several ways. It competes with the wheat for available sunlight; the roots draw water and nutrients away from the wheat; and darnel can host diseases and parasites that harm the wheat. However, the farmer doesn't seem too concerned with the harm the weed might do to the wheat.

A final point: darnel is also toxic to humans, farm animals, and dogs. None of this is mentioned by Jesus. So, when we interpret the parable, we can only go by the information the parable gives us, which is mostly that uprooting the weeds before the wheat is ready will do more harm than good and that it's best to wait for the harvest.

Here is the gist of an interpretation of the parable alone, which works if you don't bother to read Jesus' interpretation:

We can't tell which are the weeds and which are the wheat when it's still early in the growing season. We won't know until we get closer to the harvest. In the same way, we can't always tell how a person will turn out. For example, a troublesome youth might turn into a fine young man if we leave him alone to grow, mature, and be nurtured. So, pulling a plant early before we know what it will be is foolish and harmful to us all.

Jesus' interpretation will take us in a different direction.

Farmers today still have trouble with darnel, in places like Syria and Jordan. One hundred years ago, up to two-thirds of the sown wheat crop yielded darnel. It was typical for one-fifth of the crop to be weeds. Thankfully, in the more mechanized parts of the world, seed sorting machines can tell the difference between wheat and weeds, so a North American wheat field is pretty much just that: wheat.

After he told today's parable, Jesus told two more, and then answered the disciples question when they asked him to explain the parable about the weeds and wheat. So, he did.

The parable and the interpretation don't seem to fit together.

In the explanation, the toxic effects of the weeds are the main focus but in a metaphorical, end-times way. In Jesus' interpretation, the weeds cause *spiritual harm* which is a much bigger concern than any physical harm they might cause.

Here, the weeds have the potential to harm the wheat at any time. The weeds are 'the children of the evil one' and that implies that they too are evil. The causes of sin are literally obstacles to faith and possibly to belief. Evildoers can poison the love and faith of the children of the Kingdom – the good seed. Evildoers can bring ruin to believers by causing them to sin (as opposed to believers choosing to sin on their own, which happens too).

So, it's not just a matter of weeds growing among the wheat that we'll deal with it later – we have to worry about the negative influence the weeds can exert on the wheat at any time until the harvest.

One ancient belief held that wheat could degenerate into weeds if they grew up together. This apparently was a one-way street: darnel would never become wheat.

Interpreting the parable on its own the way we did earlier suggests that we should let the weeds and wheat grow together because you never know, the weeds could turn out to be okay; don't be hasty.

In Jesus' interpretation, the weeds will always be weeds. They will always be toxic, and will always be a danger to the wheat, and it will take angels to root them out and toss them into the fire. The weeds by their nature oppose God and tempt the children of the kingdom to turn from God.

Even in the first century, weeds were considered a plant that caused economic losses or ecological damage, created health problems for animals or humans, or were simply undesirable where they were growing³ – as in taking over your wheat or cotton field.

But God made the weeds *and* the wheat. The metaphorical weeds might have been corrupted by the evil one, but God made us all. There is beauty and goodness in everything God makes.

For us, while 'the Son of Man will send his angels' to collect the weeds, 'the *righteous* will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.'

What does it mean to be righteous, especially in the world today?

As far as the Bible is concerned, righteousness means conforming to God's will in everything: in law, government, covenant loyalty, ethical behavior, and in our actions.⁴ Do that, and you are considered a righteous person.

Jesus taught that conforming to his teachings also made you righteous.

For Matthew, righteousness is behavioral: we should practice piety through prayer and fasting, give alms, care for the widows and orphans and so on.

Wanting to be righteous is very close to seeking God's Kingdom, and we can see how righteousness helps bring it about.

So how might a perceived weed become righteous wheat?

In the old-fashioned way, of course: through repentance, faithful living, and coming to God in every way. Let anyone with ears listen.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/wheats-evil-twin-has-been-intoxicating-humans-for-centuries>

² L. G. Holm et al, *The World's Worst Weeds: Distribution and Biology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1977) 318-19.

³ <https://www.almanac.com/content/common-garden-weeds>

⁴ Green, J. B. (2005). In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. essay, InterVarsity Press, 411-416.