

## Wheat and Tares: A Parable of Both Judgment and Grace

By Mike Magee, MD, MDiv

In his parable on the wheat and weeds (tares), *Matthew 13:24-30*, and its interpretation in *13:36-43*, Jesus seems to divide humankind into “good” and “bad.” Jesus himself gives one interpretation of his parable: The field is the world, the wheat are the children of God’s reign, and the weeds are “all causes of sin and evil-doers.” Historically, the church gives us an additional interpretation: The plantings of wheat are church members who are pure in motive, and the weeds are the hypocrites. For either interpretation, uprooting the weeds will uproot the precious wheat, so the landowner tells the farmer to wait until harvest time. But Jesus is careful never to use the adjective “bad” in describing the weeds, or the sinners and hypocrites they represent.

As with all metaphors, this one can be stretched too far. In the plant world, wheat is always wheat, and weeds are always weeds. Not so with people, because people are not plants. People of faith believe God can transform metaphorical weeds into wheat. Conceivably evil-doers are confused good people, whom God can transform into doers-of-good. We can never be sure when God is through with us or other people, so we should not be too hasty in judging! So maybe this is a parable about patience.

One reason we delay uprooting the weeds prematurely is our fear of uprooting the wheat which is right beside it. But there are weeds in the Middle East today, and presumably 2000 years ago, which look exactly like wheat right up until the time of harvest. What looks like a weed today may be an immature blade of precious wheat! And the person who looks like a weed may turn out to be better wheat than the rest of us! Jesus advises us to wait and see what kind of “fruit” or grain those presumed weeds will bear before judging them. But Elsworth Kalas provides an additional interpretation.

Perhaps instead of the wheat and weeds representing individual persons, and the field representing the world or the church, we can think of the field as an individual soul, and the “wheat and weeds” as what is sown in the soil of our souls. In this additional interpretation, perhaps Jesus is not speaking of burning the hypocrites and evildoers, since every one of us are hypocrites and evildoers. Perhaps Jesus is speaking of God’s Word burning away the dross within each of us. Burning away the weed, the hypocrisy, the genetic and cultural burden, and saving only the wheat within each of us. Maybe the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is not a response to condemnation, but a response to withdrawal from our addictions. Maybe in God’s eyes, evil-doers are not “bad” people. Maybe in God’s eyes they, that is, we, are “diamonds in the rough.”

I believe it is God’s role to judge, not ours. But here is the paradoxical and counter-intuitive truth: God’s judgment is always mercy. So for many Christians, their church is not a citadel for the pure and sinless, but rather is a hospital for hypocrites and sinners like you and me. Everyone has the right to enter a church, but no one has the right to shut anyone else out. Perhaps the parable of the wheat and the weeds is indeed a parable of God’s judgment, but not of condemnation. Perhaps it is a parable of God’s grace.

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