

**Wheat and Tares: A Parable of Both Judgment and Grace**  
**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**  
**Mike Magee**  
**Brentwood First Presbyterian Church**  
**7/2708**

**Jesus seems to divide humankind into good wheat and bad weeds**

Parables are not meant to pat us on the back, but to give us a kick in the pants. They are not intended to comfort us, but to challenge us and change us. Parables speak out against the status quo. Parables are demonstrators waving signs of protest, speaking out against our ways of thinking, our traditional ways of experiencing and obeying God.

Today's parable is about wheat and weeds. Some of you gardeners may have heard, when weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant. If that does not work, there is another test. To distinguish flowers from weeds, simply pull up everything. What grows back is weeds.

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. A church goer once invited a friend to go to church with him. His friend answered, "Well, I'd like to go. But the church is so full of hypocrites." The church goer replied, "That's okay. There's always room for one more." Back to the parable: 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.

**We cannot tell the wheat from the weeds**

Do you remember the Crusades from your history class? One of the most awful times in history, when Christians went to war in the name of Christ. In one of the first crusades, Christian knights from Western Europe blew through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land and killed everyone with brown skin and turbans. It was not until later, when they turned the bodies over; that they found crosses around most of their victim's necks. It never occurred to them that Christians could have brown skin as well as white, or that Christians might wear turbans.

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. So maybe this is a parable about patience.

### **God can transform weeds**

We think of Bill Gates as the world’s hugest philanthropist. He either has already, or soon plans to retire to administer his charitable foundation. He believes he can eliminate malaria and AIDS in his life time. But this is not the picture of him 10 years ago. He was viewed at that time as the most cut throat entrepreneur in the world, who when asked why he gave nothing to charity, said, “I earned it, It is my money.” But something happened. Something transformed him.

As with all metaphors, the one of wheat and weeds 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! But Elsworth Kalas provides an additional interpretation.

### **The weeds as “diamonds in the rough”**

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 in God’s eyes, evil-doers are not “bad” people. Maybe in God’s eyes they, that is, we, are “diamonds in the rough.” Someone once said that when we see a brother or sister in sin, there are three things we do not know: First, we do not know how hard he or she tried not to sin. Second, we do not know the power of the forces that assailed him or her. Third, we do not know what we would have done in the same circumstance.

I am going to describe what some pastors, not me, view as the ideal congregation. A congregation of people who renew their spiritual vows each year. Their vows to tithe, to attend Bible study every week, to pray every day, to

be politically active for the poor every week. And they sign on the dotted line every year. A congregation of committed people. That is the ideal church community for some pastors. But not for me. I want a community that is wide open to all people, including the uncommitted, the half committed, the lukewarm, the confused, the puzzled, the materialists, the messed up; the addicted, the afflicted. A community where all are welcome. We want both weeds and wheat in our church, because none of us are sure which is which and who is who. We never know when God is going to be through with us, and God can certainly use weeds. And God has charged the church with taking diamonds in the rough and making them shine.

### **Conclusion**

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 the 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 our church, but no one has the right to shut anyone 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.

### **Prayer of Francis of Assisi, a gardener**

Lord, make us instruments of your peace; where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, let us sow pardon; where there is doubt, let us sow faith; where there is despair, let us sow hope; where there is darkness, let us sow light; and where there is sadness, let us sow joy.

O Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.