

INTRODUCTION

In Matthew 13 Jesus tells seven classic parables about the Kingdom of heaven. Last week we studied the parable of the Sower, which also is recorded in Mark and Luke. Today we're going to examine the parable of the "Wheat and Weeds," which appears only in Matthew. This is an amazing parable because it encompasses God's work of redemption from the beginning of time until the end of time. Several times in scripture the end of time is compared to a harvest. That's why I'm calling this "God's Final Harvest."

Before we examine this parable, let me ask you: Do you think our world is getting better or worse and worse? For a few years at the beginning of the 20th century, most Americans were very optimistic that the world was moving toward utopia. They thought the world was getting better and better. But then World War I came, the war that was to end all wars, followed by World War II. There don't seem to be too many people in the 21st century who believe the world is getting better. With the rise of terrorism and economic problems around the world things seem to be going from bad to worse.

Actually, almost every generation thinks the world is going to the dogs. I came across a humorous poem that expresses this idea.

My granddad, viewing earth's worn cogs,
Said, "Things are going to the dogs."

His granddad, in his house of logs,
Said, "Things are going to the dogs."

And his granddad, in the Flemish bogs,
Said, "Things are going to the dogs."

And his granddad, in his old skin togs,
Said, "Things are going to the dogs."

But there's one thing I have to state:
The dogs have had a good long wait."

Vance Havner once said, "I used to say the world was going to the dogs, but I've stopped saying that out of respect for dogs!"

So, are things going to get better or are they going to get worse? Jesus answers that question in this parable found in Matthew 13:24-30:

"Jesus told them another parable: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did

this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

Then Jesus told two additional parables we'll examine in the next couple of weeks. After that, He took a break (maybe a coffee break). That's when His disciples asked Him about that particular parable.

Matthew 13:36-43. "Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.' He answered, 'The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where 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.'"

Whenever you study a parable of Jesus, there is always the natural truth of the story itself, and then there is the supernatural layer of meaning below the surface. The good news about this parable is we don't have to speculate about the meaning, the Lord gives us a full interpretation. I want to present the parable to you and then I'll share four personal lessons we can apply to our lives. If this parable were made into a movie there would be three scenes:

1. THE SOWING OF THE SEEDS

In the natural story, the farmer planted wheat seeds. But there was a wicked farmer who slipped into the field and planted weeds among the wheat seeds. In the parable of the sower, the seed was the word of God. The seeds were the same but the soils were different. In this parable the soil is the same, but the seeds are different.

SPIRITUAL TRUTH: Jesus plants good seeds (people) in the world, but Satan plants bad seeds

When Jesus was alone with His disciples He explained the cast of characters to them. The field is the world and the good farmer represents Jesus. The good seeds are the sons of the kingdom. Jesus came to plant seeds of goodness by placing His goodness inside people. The enemy is the devil and the bad seeds represent evil people. The harvest is the end of the world.

Did you notice Jesus said the wheat represents "sons of the kingdom" and the weeds represent "sons of the evil one?" A few weeks ago I spoke on God's family, and some people were surprised because I said not everyone is a part of God's family. They honestly believed everyone belongs to the Family of God. The next time you hear someone trying to reconcile Christianity

with Islam or Buddhism and they might say, "Well, we're all God's Children." I hope you'll lovingly correct them by saying that we're all God's creation, but only those who know Jesus are a child of God. You may think that sounds pretty narrow-minded. I agree, but you have to admit that Jesus sounds narrow-minded by saying some people are "sons of the kingdom" and the rest are "sons of the evil one."

2. THE GROWING OF THE PLANTS

As the wheat began to grow, so did the weeds. A weed that often infests wheat fields is called darnel. It looks a lot like wheat in the early stages. Wheat farmers in Kansas have nicknamed it "cheat." So the wheat and cheat grew together. The farmer's servants questioned the farmer and he said, "An enemy has done this!"

When I was a sophomore in high school our football coach plowed up the field between the hash marks and planted grass seed. One night a friend and I slipped into the stadium and played a prank. We planted corn seed. As the grass started to grow, so did the stalks of corn. The coach was mad because he thought he had bought bad grass seed. Of course, we couldn't keep quiet about our little prank, so we told some of our friends. Word got back to our coach and he wasn't happy. He made us gently pull up every corn stalk as he watched. If we disturbed any of his precious grass he made us run wind sprints. Trust me, I believe verse in the Bible that says, "Whatever a person sows, that will he also reap!"

In my case, we had to pull out the corn, but in Jesus' story, the servants were told not to pull up the weeds because it would damage the wheat.

SPIRITUAL TRUTH: We live in a world with bad people, but it's not our job to remove them

In the parable, the over-zealous servants wanted to go out and immediately rip up the weeds. But the farmer told them to let them grow together because the roots of the darnel were intertwined with the wheat. Pulling out the weeds would hurt the wheat.

It's not our job to remove all the wicked people. That doesn't mean we should allow criminal activities to thrive. God has given government the power to punish evildoers, but it's not our job as individuals to go out and start chopping out all the bad people.

3. THE MOWING AT THE HARVEST

The time came for the harvest and the servants went out to mow down the crop using a hand scythe. They cut it all down together. Then they separated the weeds from the wheat. The weeds were bundled up and burned and the wheat was bundled into sheaves and placed in the farmer's barn. That's the natural story, but there is a supernatural meaning.

SPIRITUAL TRUTH: At God's harvest, believers will be gathered to heaven, and lost people will be separated from God in hell

There are several passages in the Bible that compare the final judgment to a harvest. Revelation 14 describes this final harvest of people. When does this happen in relation to the rapture and the tribulation? I'm not going to chase that eschatological rabbit in this message. Jesus was telling a story about the final destiny of people. There are only two eternal destinations. One is heaven, represented by the farmer's barns. The other is hell, represented by the bonfire. Notice Jesus said the fire of hell is not just symbolic. He spoke of a literal heaven and a literal hell. One of the most important questions you will ever answer is, "Where will I spend eternity?" That's the basic parable, but there are four personal lessons I'd like for us to learn from what Jesus said:

1. BE ENCOURAGED! WE FACE OPPOSITION, BUT IT WILL FAIL

Jesus made it perfectly clear we have an enemy who is actively opposing God's work in this world. The word He used for "enemy" is from the word "hate." The devil hates God's work and God's people and his plan is to try to sabotage God's plan. He does this by planting bad people in God's world.

God gets blamed for a lot of the evil in the world, but the devil plants the bad seeds, not God. Have you ever noticed the same people who blame God for evil seldom give Him credit for the good? Years ago a pastor friend of mine went to visit a family in a small town whose teenage son had been killed in a car accident. He had been drinking and lost control of his car. The boy's family didn't go to church, but one of the neighbors was a member of my friend's church, so the family asked him to conduct the funeral. He visited the devastated parents in their home on the evening of the accident. As my friend prepared to leave he said, "Why don't we have a word of prayer?" The mother burst out, "No! Absolutely not! God killed my son, so there will be no praying in my house!" My friend was shocked, but as he reflected on that experience he told me that was probably the first time God had crossed her mind in a long time. When her son was born, she probably didn't say, "God, thank you for giving me a son." But when tragedy struck, suddenly God was responsible. The devil must laugh with glee every time God gets blamed for his evil schemes.

Some people like to say the devil is alive and well and living on planet earth. Well, he's alive, but he's not well. Since the cross, he has been fighting a losing battle. The Bible says when Jesus died, He destroyed the works of the devil. God predicted in Genesis 3 that the serpent would strike the heel of the Messiah, but that the Messiah would crush Satan's head. A heel wound isn't fatal, but a crushed head is a fatal blow. And since the cross, Jesus has continued to crush the serpent's head. And one day, the crushing will be complete. Revelation 20 predicts, "And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." (Revelation 20:10). Hell was never designed for human habitation. Jesus said in Matthew 25:41 that the lake of fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. Satan is like a spiritual suicide bomber. He knows about his final punishment, so he is desperately trying to take as many people with him as he can. I love this book, because the devil doesn't appear in the first two chapters or the last two chapters. God will put an end to evil. Be encouraged Church, we win in the end!

2. BE SURE! CONFIRM YOU'RE NOT A COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIAN

These weeds are planted throughout the world, but there are some that have infiltrated the church. Whenever God creates something, Satan always tries to counterfeit it. When you hear the word "counterfeit," what comes to your mind? Money! Do you know how bank tellers and cashiers are taught to recognize counterfeit money? They become so familiar with the REAL currency that when a counterfeit bill is placed in their hands they can see and feel the difference.

God is producing authentic believers, and Satan has planted counterfeit believers in churches. Some people have swallowed the devil's lie that keeping religious rules and following religious rituals will get a person to heaven. They haven't understood the only people who will make it to heaven are those who have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Billy Graham once said his greatest mission field has been the rolls of churches. During his crusades about 70% of the people saved were members of churches. They were weeds among the wheat. These were good people who probably thought they were already saved. Jess described these counterfeit Christians in Matthew 7 when He said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers.'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

These were religious people who knew the right language: "Lord, Lord." They practiced religious activities: "We cast out demons and prophesied." They were fully expecting to be saved, but Jesus said, "I never KNEW you." Salvation is knowing Jesus. It's not enough to know *about* Jesus: it is knowing Jesus. I know about George Washington, but I don't know him. I know Jesus Christ and talked to Him just a few minutes ago.

Years ago when I was a youth evangelist, I was preaching a weekend revival in Jackson, Alabama. Before the Sunday night service I had dinner in the home of the chairman of the deacons. I sat down in a chair in his den and saw something out of the corner of my eye. I turned and looked and then I jumped out of my chair. Because coiled beside me on the floor was a huge rattlesnake! I immediately felt embarrassed because I quickly realized it was stuffed. My host was a taxidermist. As I looked around the den I noticed he had a stuffed feral hog and a stuffed bobcat. There were several deer heads mounted on the wall he had shot and stuffed as well. The animals looked alive, but, of course, they were stone-cold dead.

That evening after dinner I preached on Matthew 7. I talked about how many people would be shocked on the Day of Judgment to discover they are lost because they never knew Jesus. During the invitation, my host, the chairman of the deacons came forward and laid his head on the pastor's shoulder. They stood there talking and praying for several verses of "Just as I am." Finally, the pastor stopped the song and said that the chairman of the deacons had something to say. He turned to the congregation and with tears in his eyes confessed he had been a counterfeit Christian. He said they knew he was a taxidermist and he made dead animals look alive. He shared that he had been like one of his stuffed animals. He looked spiritually alive, but he was spiritually dead, but that he had prayed to receive Christ that night. The church was clapping and shouting, "Amen!" He said, "I feel that I have to resign as a deacon because when I was elected a deacon I wasn't even saved." The pastor said, "Brother, we accept your resignation as a deacon,

and we rejoice over the fact that you are truly saved now. All in favor of restoring our brother as the chairman of the deacons say, 'Amen.'" And "amens" reverberated in that little church.

Here was a man who was a church member—not only a church member, but a leader in the church who admitted he had been acting out a religious role rather than truly knowing Jesus Christ. Do you know the Lord? It's like asking, "Are you married?" Nobody says, "I think so" or "I hope so." They know! You can have the same sense of assurance about knowing Jesus.

3. BE CAREFUL! RASH JUDGEMENTS CAUSE MUCH HARM

The servants wanted to root out all the weeds, but the Master wisely told them to let them grow together because if they dug out the weeds, they would destroy the wheat as well. We're the same way. We don't like weeds. We want to crank up our spiritual weed-eaters and rush out to start whacking away at the weeds around us. But if you do that you're going to make a mess.

The reason I'm not qualified to be a weed-eater is because I can't really tell who is a wheat and who is a weed. I don't know if anyone else is saved or not. I can inspect fruit, but sometimes the weeds and the wheat look the same. If I go out and start whacking away, I'm liable to damage some of the good wheat.

Pastor Frank Craddock wrote, "Folks, I am telling you, I do not know a weed from wheat. I do not know a weed from a flower. I pull back the swing blade ready to assault this bunch of weeds, and here comes my wife, Nettie, saying, 'Wait, wait, wait, wait!' Then that night at the supper table, there is that 'weed' in a vase in the center of the table. It looked like a weed; I thought it was a weed. I don't know a weed from a flower, and every church I have known that tried to weed the garden made horrible, horrible mistakes. Because, you see, that is God's business. God said, 'In the harvest, I will take care of all that. I am the only one who knows weeds from wheat. So you leave it alone.'"

We look around us at people that we think are bad and we say, "Lord, don't you think we should rip these weeds out?" He says, "No, let them grow together." We say, "But, Lord, what if these weeds quench the Spirit and get in our way?" He says, "Let them grow together until the harvest and I'll take care of it." God isn't worried about it because He knows that there is a harvest coming.

This unholy desire on the part of Christians to get rid of the bad weeds has left us some dark episodes in history. Around the year 1000A.D. the Christians in the Holy Roman Empire decided they should root out the infidels who were occupying the Holy Land. These attempts were called the Crusades. In one of the first crusades, Christian knights from Western Europe stormed through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land. They killed everyone with brown skin who was wearing a turban. It was not until they turned the bodies over that they found crosses around the necks of most of their victims. It never occurred to them that a Christian might have brown skin and wear a turban. While trying to cut down the weeds they damaged the wheat.

God hasn't called us to be weed eaters. He has called us to be fruitful.

4. BE PATIENT! GOD ALONE WILL DETERMINE WHO BELONGS TO HIM

Only God knows who is saved. At the final harvest, we may be surprised at some of the people who are God's wheat. We may want to ask, "What are YOU doing in my bundle and my barn?" Remember it is God's barn, not yours. And we may be surprised at some of the people who aren't there. We may look around in God's barn and ask, "Where is Brother so-and-so?"

And we must be patient to allow God to deal with evil according to His own timetable. If I were God for a day I'd do away with all the evildoers in my first five seconds. But God has a better plan to wait and eliminate evil at His Final Harvest. Until then, we must be patient. That doesn't mean we should accept evil or ignore evil. Until Jesus returns, He has called us to be the salt of the earth. We're to be agents to slow down the moral corruption of our world. We're called to be the light of world in the midst of the moral darkness. But we shouldn't despair because God will eliminate all evil at His Final Harvest. God's judgment is slow, but it is never late. So be patient. The harvest is coming.

In 1895 a man named Pearl Wait came up with a way to mix fruit syrup with gelatin. His wife called his concoction Jell-O. After trying to market Jell-O for a couple of years Mr. Wait couldn't wait. He became impatient with the slow sales so he sold the rights to the recipe to his neighbor, Frank Woodward, for \$450. By 1905, sales of Jell-O reached \$1 million and General Foods later bought out Mr. Woodward's Jell-O company. Today, because of his impatience, not one of Pearl Wait's descendents get a penny of royalty from the sale of 1.1 million boxes of Jell-O sold every day.

It's been said, "Good things come to those who wait." We must wait patiently for the return of Christ and the time of God's final Harvest.

CONCLUSION

So to get back to my question at the beginning of this message: "Is the world getting better or is it getting worse?" Jesus said, "Both!" It just depends on whether you are one of the weeds or wheat. If you're one of the devil's weeds, your world is going to get worse—a lot worse. But if you're a stalk of God's wheat, your future is bright. If you know the Lord, you face a brilliant future. He said you will "shine like the sun" forever in God's kingdom.

This is a parable. But remember God's kingdom isn't made up of plants; it's full of people. There is a point at which all metaphors and parables break down. Jesus started these parables by saying, "The Kingdom of heaven is LIKE..." There's an important difference between people and plants. A weed is a weed is a weed; it can never become a stalk of wheat. But Jesus can change a spiritual weed into a stalk of wheat. That's the miracle of salvation. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Remember my taxidermist friend? He was a weed and God changed him into a fruitful Christian.

Any wheat farmer can easily tell the difference between wheat and weeds. Want to know how? As the harvest time nears, the top of the stalk sags downward, it bows. The head of the wheat

grows so heavy with the grain, the fruit, that it begins to bow toward the ground. Meanwhile, the weeds stand tall and straight. They never bow. What a lesson!

A true believer is humble; and the more mature and fruitful they become, the more they bow before the Lord in humility. But the counterfeit Christian stands tall, proud of his religious accomplishments which he foolishly believes will get him to heaven.

The Bible promises that one day, "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord." (Philippians 2:10-11) So you can bow before the Lord today, or you can bow before Him later, but sooner or later you WILL bow. If you will bow before Jesus today and crown Him as the Lord of your life, you can claim the promise that one day you will "shine like the sun" forever and ever in His Kingdom! That's the good news!

OUTLINE

1. THE SOWING OF THE SEEDS

SPIRITUAL TRUTH: Jesus plants good seeds (people) in the world, but Satan plants bad seeds

2. THE GROWING OF THE PLANTS

SPIRITUAL TRUTH: We live in a world with bad people, but it's not our job to remove them

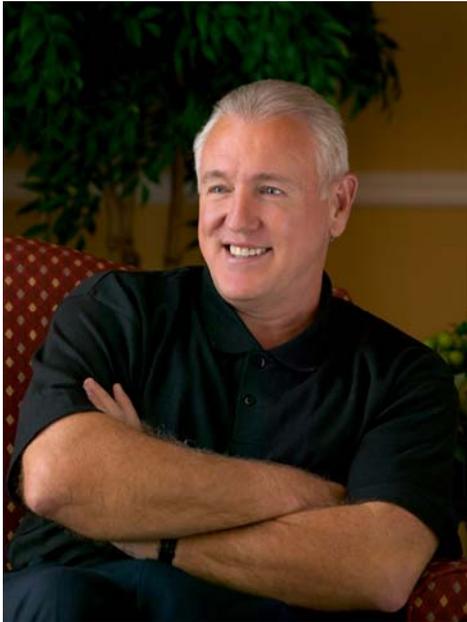
3. THE MOWING AT THE HARVEST

SPIRITUAL TRUTH: At God's harvest, believers will be gathered to heaven, and lost people will be separated from God in hell

PERSONAL LESSONS

1. Be encouraged! We face opposition, but it will fail
2. Be sure! Confirm you're not a counterfeit Christian
3. Be careful! Rash judgements cause much harm
4. Be patient! God alone will determine who belongs to him

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes