

They Will Shine Like the Sun

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we receive the nourishment of your word. Help us bear the fruit of faith that overcomes the world. In the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.

I often find myself wishing that Jesus would return quickly, remove evil completely, and bring the kingdom of heaven to its fullness. When we look at the evil and sorrow in the world, such thoughts come to us often. We cannot fully know the meaning of everything we experience. Yet God, the Creator and Sovereign of the whole universe, has a plan, and he has given us Scripture so that we may see His larger picture. How could we ever fully know the infinite God, and how could we ever completely understand his lofty thoughts? That is why we must invest our whole lives in knowing him.

What is truly gracious is that God, in his mercy, has revealed his plan to us in language we can understand. The parable we read today also shows us his plan of salvation.

The “parable of the weeds,” as the disciples named it when they asked Jesus to explain it (v. 36), appears only in the Gospel of Matthew. When you hear this story, what comes to your mind? Do you ever wonder, “Am I good seed or weeds?” Have you ever asked yourself that? If you believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose again, and if you have received him as your Lord and Savior, then you have become the good seed.

Before we believed in Jesus and received salvation, we were weeds. But in order for us to bear the fruit of the kingdom, the Holy Spirit worked in our lives through prevenient grace, giving us the gift of faith and transforming us into good seed.

Today’s parable is not spoken to an unspecified crowd but to the disciples. It was a message they needed as those who would proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. And if we are disciples, this is a word we also must receive.

Jesus begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field” (v. 24). Later, when he explains the parable, he says that the “good seed” represents “the sons of the kingdom.” The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, that is, Jesus, and “the field is the world” (vv. 37-38). This indicates that the gospel of the kingdom will extend beyond Israel and reach the whole world. It also reveals the ownership of the one who plants the sons of the kingdom in this world. He is the Lord of all. As Psalm 24:1 (NIV) testifies, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in

it." God did not create the world and then withdraw his involvement or interest. Rather, he continues to lead the world toward the restoration of paradise.

Here, the question of theodicy naturally arises. If God is almighty and good, why does evil exist in this world?

In the parable, Jesus says, "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" (vv. 25-26). The servants of the landowner came and asked, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?" (v. 27). This is the question of theodicy. The landowner, who represents God, is good and has sown only good seed. So why does evil, the weeds, exist? God created a good world, so how has evil entered this world or even the church?

Jesus gives three answers to this question in the parable. The first is that the origin of evil is an external, personal enemy. When the servants ask, the landowner replies, "An enemy did this" (v. 28a). Jesus explains that evil is sown by the enemy, the devil, who has invaded God's field, which is the world. Think of how the devil entered the Garden of Eden.

The weeds in the parable refer to a type of dandelion. Its early growth looks almost identical to wheat or barley, and it is difficult to distinguish until the heads form. If eaten, it can cause food poisoning and even death. Jesus says this represents "the sons of the evil one" (v. 38), and later he adds that they are "all who cause people to stumble and all who do evil" (v.41).

Why does the enemy secretly sow weeds? His purpose is to hinder the growth and harvest of the good seed. In other words, he seeks to corrupt the purity of faith, to lead people to compromise by following worldly thinking, and to draw them away from God so that the building of the kingdom is obstructed. Jesus says the enemy came while people were sleeping. This means the enemy works at any time, even when we are resting peacefully. Because of the enemy's presence, believers are engaged in spiritual warfare. Since this is a given reality, we must be spiritually armed.

First Peter 5:8–9 exhorts us, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

Second, the reason evil continues to exist is the patience of God and the temporary postponement of judgment. When the servants ask, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?" (v. 28b), the landowner replies, "Let them grow until the harvest. While you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them" (v. 29). The reason God does not immediately uproot evil is not because he is unable, but because he intentionally waits in order to protect the wheat, the righteous. Second Peter 3:9 teaches the same truth: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

This parable likely became guidance for the early church during the time when the Roman Empire persecuted believers, a period that produced many martyrs as well as many who fell away. When those who had once renounced their faith tried to return to the church after the persecution ended, there was conflict about how to respond. Yet the church moved toward forgiving and receiving back those who had been excommunicated. Just as the Lord said to let both grow together until the harvest, the church entrusted final judgment to God rather than to human beings, choosing instead to embrace people within the community.

The third answer this parable gives to the question of theodicy is that the problem of evil is not fully resolved within history but is carried forward to the end times. The landowner says, "At harvest 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" (v. 30). Although good and evil are mixed together in the present reality, the judgment in which the justice of God is revealed will surely and precisely come at the end of the age.

The harvesters are angels (v. 39). Jesus explains, "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 blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (vv. 41-42). In Jesus' interpretation, the field is the world, but the place where the weeds are gathered is "his kingdom." This means the parable addresses the cosmic problem of evil and also applies within the community of the church. When dealing with hypocrites and false believers who exist within the earthly church, we must not rush to judgment. Instead, we trust the final judgment of God and practice patience.

Someone once said, "If you find a perfect church, do not join it. The moment you join, it will no longer be perfect." Final judgment belongs to the Lord, not to us. We cannot take the role of judge.

As we await the day when the Lord returns as the judge, our task is to endure and grow as good seed until we bear fruit. At the same time, as the servants of the landowner, we are called to patiently tend the field so that the good seed may grow to its full harvest.

The eschatological hope that trusts in the certainty of judgment is one of the core kingdom values. This hope profoundly shapes us in two ways. On the positive side, we can devote ourselves to bearing the fruit of faith as we look forward to the reward God will give on the day of judgment. For the good seed, the end of the age is not a day to fear. As Jesus says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear" (v. 43). It is a day of reward. Revelation 22:12 promises, "Look, I am coming soon. My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done."

On the negative side, this hope keeps us from being discouraged by the presence of evil and enables us to walk the path of faith faithfully. In Psalm 73, Asaph confesses that when he saw the prosperity of the wicked, "my feet had almost slipped" (verse 2). Yet when he entered the sanctuary and understood their end, he declared, "Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors" (verses 18–19).

Right now, the crops in Wisconsin are ripening as they endure all kinds of weather. Before they are harvested, they pass through drought, storms, and wind as part of the process of bearing fruit. In the same way, before the final harvest, we too will bear fruit as we pass through seasons of suffering and trial. All of God's good seed who believe this kingdom value say together, Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, who has brought the kingdom of heaven to this earth, we thank you for planting us as sons and daughters of the kingdom, like good seed. In the tension of this present and imperfect world, help us draw forward the values of the Father's kingdom that will fully come, so that we may bear fruit and reveal your reign. Keep us from being overcome by evil and empower us to overcome evil with good. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. Amen.