

# The Wheat and the Weeds

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

## Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



"Botanical Painting of Wheat" (1863)

## Background

Our parable today is one of the most misunderstood and misused of all of Jesus' parables. The meaning isn't immediately obvious, so you have to listen closely to the layers of meaning, but here's the gist of it:

God's kingdom is real in the world, even if its presence isn't always clearly apparent or overwhelming. The fact that there's pain, sorrow, and wrongdoing in this world doesn't nullify God's plan for us and for his new creation. Good and evil are side by side and intermingled in this life. Evil will ultimately and finally be sifted and sorted out ...*but not yet*.

And so in the meantime we've got to be patient. Wait and not rush to judgment. Practice wise discernment. Trust, in the midst of the uncertainty and blur of this life. By the grace of God—be who you are. Live into your identity as a child of light. Shine, especially in the darkness.

So, let's hear the word of the Lord from ...

**Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43 (NRSV)**

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

**SERMON – The Wheat and the Weeds**

In the award winning documentary "*The Fog of War*," former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara tells of the harrowing decisions President Kennedy and his advisors faced during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.



The United States and Russia were on the brink of nuclear war. At the most tense moment of the crisis, John F. Kennedy received two messages from the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. One was conciliatory, the other far more hawkish. Which note was the wheat and which was the weed?

Most of Kennedy's advisers believed that the second, more hawkish letter, represented Khrushchev's real views and should be taken seriously. However, one lone voice dissented among the President's counsel. Llewellyn Thompson, Jr. had been the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1962 and had come to know the Russian president. He and his wife had spent time living with Khrushchev and his wife in their home in Russia. Thompson said the first, more conciliatory note sounded more like the Khrushchev he knew. He sensed the second more hawkish note was written to appease the Russian generals. President Kennedy went with Thompson's minority view.

Khrushchev was given a way of backing down without losing face—and the result was that war was averted. It was the right choice.

But things easily could have gone the other way. Fortunately wisdom, patience, and diplomacy prevailed—helping us dodge not just a bullet, but a nuclear bomb. But sometimes, our judgments don't work out so well.

In Joseph Hallinan's book *"Why We Make Mistakes,"* he tells of an incident that happened several years ago in the village of St. Brides in South Wales. The Associated Press reported that a mob of vigilantes attacked and vandalized the office and home of a prominent children's doctor in the town. *Why would such a terrible thing happen to someone doing good?* Because, according to police reports, the vigilantes confused the word "pediatrician" for the word "pedophile." The local paper interviewed Dr. Yvette Cloete. "I suppose" said the doctor, "I'm really a victim of ignorance."

What's the moral of both of these stories? Beware of knee-jerk reactions or assumptions. Be willing to sit with things for a while. Listen. Learn. Gather more information. Stay open. God perceives people and situations perfectly. We don't. We're not God. We don't have the full picture. God does.

Jesus isn't saying here that we should be passive. "Deliver us from evil," Jesus teaches us to pray. People of faith are called to pray for and work towards God's will to be done on earth. And so we can't idly stand by as evil is done. But ultimately, at the right time, **God, not us**, will get to the bottom of things.

While Jesus was on earth, he had his doubters. They wanted the Messiah to sort everything out—YESTERDAY. Kick out Rome. Separate the chaff from the wheat. Declare victory. Rule with an iron fist. Now. Act with clarity and 100% certainty—quickly. But Jesus' kingdom didn't and doesn't work this way. It was slower. It grew up alongside weeds and thorns and rocks.

The life of faith involves patience, trust in the not-knowing, and hope. And so Jesus said the kingdom of God is kind of like... a field. Good seed was sown by a farmer. But there was also another sower. An enemy sowing bad seed under the cover of night. Jesus is cautioning us:

- Not all seed is good seed in this world of ours. Farmers in Oklahoma call this "cheat." Cheat is basically the chaff, stubble, and weeds that rob a crop of its value when it's mixed in with the wheat.



WHEAT: before it is fully ripe.

TARES: Lolium Temulentum

The weeds in Jesus' story have no commercial worth. They're a nuisance and have no nutritional value. In fact, they're poisonous. The weeds are also confusing because they're from the same wheat family, so it's not easy to distinguish between the two. These weeds have stronger and deeper roots than wheat. So when you remove the weeds, you'll also inevitably pull out the roots of the good wheat along with them. The tricky part is that the wheat and the weeds grow up *together*. They aren't segregated or cordoned off neatly. Weeds don't stay where they're supposed to stay. They are intermingled and intertwined.

Side by side, you can see the difference between the two, but not right away. *You just have to wait.* When the wheat and the weeds are mature, then it's easy to separate them—for God to separate them. But now it's confusing. So Jesus is coaching us here—life is messy. Trust me in and through the uncertainty.

Look to God when you're not sure:

- What's wheat and what's a weed.

When you just don't quite know:

- What's fake and what's real.
- What's truth and what's error.



It's tempting to try to get into the weed wacker business in times like these. We get antsy and anxious.

- *Master, do you want us to go and weed out the weeds?*
  - "No. While pulling up weeds you might uproot the wheat."
  - Let them both grow together until harvest.
  - Watch and wait. Wait and see. Time will tell.



Jesus tells us the field in this story is the world. It can be shocking to discover that the world isn't an entirely trustworthy place. But it doesn't stop there. Our own homes can be places of laughter . . . and bitter anger. The church isn't immune either. We are saints . . . and sinners. Most of us vacillate between the two. Even within ourselves individually we're a mixed bag of wheat and weeds. We have moments of greatness intermingled with other moments of weakness. We're a strange contradiction of light and dark. Paul describes this inner conflict in Romans 7:

*"I do not do the good I want,  
but the evil I do not want is what I do."*

I think Jesus is saying, get used to and learn to live with and in the weeds, without getting lost in them, without becoming one yourself.

And so we need to tend our gardens. Ask God to prune us, water us, and aerate us. At the same time, we've got to realize life isn't a greenhouse or a nursery with perfectly controlled environments. We live in the wild. Life is lived exposed to the unpredictable and sometimes brutal elements of raw nature. Really crummy and yucky things happen. So hold on to Jesus tightly, but hold loosely to your views. What we deem right, right now, might be shown to not be the best down the road. We've got to stay open to the Spirit's leading.

Jesus' complex story challenges us to go even deeper. Whatever is amiss in the world, in the church, or in us, we can be sure isn't from Christ. And so as God's people, we can't be tolerant of evil. But at the same time, Jesus reminds us the destruction of evil isn't our task. Jesus took care of that on the cross. In our quest to stamp out evil, we ourselves can end up becoming evil in the process. So we've got to stay humble, and keep looking to God.

There's yet another important message for us here:

- Don't give up hope when things aren't going well. Jesus' kingdom is here—limitless grace in the midst of an evil world.



It's kind of like how Mr. Rogers helped children understand the horrors of 9/11:

- When bad things happen, look for the people who are helping.  
*"Look for the Helpers. You will always find people who are helping." –Fred Rogers*
- Don't ignore sorrow, but don't give up looking for good either.
- And be someone who helps, someone who builds up rather than tears down.

There is even more to be gleaned from Jesus' parable:

Not all things that happen in this life are done by God.

- There is the reality and presence of evil we have to contend with. Don't blame God for all bad things. Sometimes we're responsible, sometimes evil is, and sometimes it's just plain bad luck. But know that, in God's good time, wrongs will be righted.
- Trust in the midst of the uncertainty. Still believe, even in the grayness and ambiguity. With the light you have, resist evil. Be open to God working out the evil in your life. Let God take care of the judging part—not us.

We can entrust this mystery of final judgment, this separating wheat from weeds, to our merciful, loving, and forgiving God. God can and will untangle it all someday. God, not us. So hold on to the promise of the future blessing. Sow seeds of love, not hate. Stay humble, watching, waiting, and ready. Then we will "shine forth as the sun" in the kingdom of our Father. Hold on to hope.

In Christ a new age has dawned, in the midst of the old. But the old is not gone ...yet.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Botanical Painting of Wheat" (1863)*, [The Sourdough School](#)

---

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.