

Pentecost 7 / July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat.”

In both the parable of the sower, which was our text last week and in His explanation of the parable of the weeds, Jesus said, “He who has ears let him hear.” Do you have ears to hear? Hear what? Is having ears to hear the same as understanding the meaning of the parable? In a sense this phrase is just as hard to understand as the parables. On the one hand, the expression functions as a marker identifying the importance of the parable, but on the other hand it suggests that it may not mean what we think it means. I saw a poster with a caption that read: “I hope you realize that what you think I said, is not what I meant.”

What does the parable mean? On the surface it seems straight forward. The good and the evil will live side by side in the world until the judgement. Then they will be separated. The evil will be burned in a fiery furnace and the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God. What is the part that requires special powers of discernment to understand?

Is it the judgement and the separation of the good from the bad? Almost every religion that I have studied (ancient and modern) contains a final separation of the good and bad. The criteria for distinguishing the good from the bad varies, but invariably the judgement is based on the performance of actions deemed acceptable by the judge, versus actions deemed inappropriate. Some religions depict the final judgement with scales balancing the amount of good a person had done against the bad he or she had done. More good than bad, means heaven. More bad than good, means hell.

Most people conceive the final judgement in these terms. In speaking of the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous at the end of the age, Jesus wasn't saying anything the Jews in first century Palestine hadn't heard before. What is it in this parable that requires ears to hear? Perhaps the basis of the final judgement isn't based on the quantity of our good deeds or the quality of our lives after all. The weeds come to a bad end. The wheat goes to eternal life. Which would you rather be? The parable makes us ask ourselves, “Are we wheat, or are we weeds? Are we sons of the evil one, or are we children of the kingdom? Most importantly, it causes us to ask, ‘how do we become children of the kingdom?’ Do you know the answer? Jesus is the answer. He sows the good seed of the gospel through which we who are by nature sinful and unclean, are made righteous in the sight of God and brought into His kingdom; now through faith, but fully in the resurrection to everlasting life. Jesus destroys weeds, by making them wheat. Faith in Him is the basis of the judgement! We become children of the kingdom and are made righteous through faith in Him.

Has anyone ever sown weeds among your wheat? Has anyone ever snuck into your yard in the dead of night and sown stink weed in your flower bed? The previous parable was driven by the unusual image of a sower casting good seed everywhere, even in places where it had little if any possibility of growing. This parable is driven by the image of an enemy, (identified later as the devil) sneaking into a field and sowing weeds among the wheat. Any of you from a farming background, ever felt tempted to hook up the seeder in the middle of the night and sow something different in your neighbour's field? If someone was tempted to do such a thing, where would they get the seed? Do seed producers grow weed seed? Good seed must be planted, but weeds just grow!

The backstory to the parable is the question: “Are we weeds, or are we wheat?” Since the sin of the first people, we are by nature weeds, for we are conceived and born into a broken relationship with God. King David confessed, “Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the moment my mother conceived me.” In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes, “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived...and were by nature children of wrath...” We are all by nature sons of the evil one, but into each of our lives the Son of Man came and sowed the good seed of grace in the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus sows the seed that kills the weeds of sin in forgiveness and transforms those who receive Him, into good seed, makes us children of the kingdom and heirs of eternal life!

Which would we rather be, weeds or wheat? At the end of the parable, the weeds are cast into a furnace and burned. If we are by nature weeds and sons of the evil one, everyone who has ears to hear should ask, ‘How do we become wheat? How do we become children of the kingdom?’ The one who sows the seed is the Son of Man. The seed He sows transforms people from being sons of the evil one, children of wrath by nature, into children of God. The seed that brings about this transformation is the gospel of grace, which creates faith in the hearts of those who believe.

These two parables are about the power of God’s word in the gospel to transform those who believe into children of God. The gospel of grace has the power to make the hearts of those who receive it fertile soil, so that faith germinates, comes to life, takes root, grows and fills a person’s life. The gospel of grace has the power to uproot weeds of sin, doubt and disbelief.

Consider the change in the disciples’ faith from the time when Jesus called them to follow Him, to the way we see them express their faith in the book of Acts. When Jesus spoke these parables their understanding wasn’t much different than the crowds; and their faith was smaller than a mustard seed. By the power of the word they became men of deep faith, who gave their lives in service to Christ. The Christian Church is built on the foundation of the apostles, with Jesus being the cornerstone. Jesus changed these men from unbelievers to believers, from weeds to wheat, from children of wrath to children of the kingdom, by sowing the seed of the gospel of grace in their hearts. Jesus sows the seed of the gospel of grace in our hearts, so faith would take hold in our hearts and produce a harvest of eternal life!

The parable ends with the righteous shining like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. Everyone who has ears to hear should ask, ‘How do we remain sons of the kingdom?’ This parable was directed at two groups of people. The crowds that saw Jesus’ signs, heard His teaching, but who still remained unbelievers. This included a number of Jesus’ followers. There was also a smaller group of disciples who believed He was the Christ, but who struggled to understand both what that meant and His teachings. We become children of the kingdom through the word that creates faith in our hearts. We remain children of the kingdom, by allowing Jesus to continuously reseed our hearts with the gospel of grace, received through the word and sacraments. This parable is a warning to take the word of grace to heart and to believe in Jesus. This parable is a call to continue in the word. It is by the power of the word that faith grows, matures and comes to fruition in eternal life.

Parables are meant to challenge our conventional way of thinking. They show us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and that in order to have insight we must have the mind of Christ. It is through the word that we gain insight into the mind of Christ and understand the ways of God. Many people who heard Jesus gave up listening, because they didn’t understand His teaching or like His words. Those who persisted grew in faith and in understanding. These received a place in the kingdom and share in eternal life at the end of the age. When we abide in the word, the Holy Spirit deepens our faith, increases our understanding and ultimately brings faith to fruition in eternal life in the kingdom of the heavenly Father.

The quality God values most in human beings is faith. God wants people to believe in Him and to believe Him. He created us to believe in Him and to believe Him. God created every creature in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth. Jesus said that God is aware of the sparrows and not one falls without His awareness. Yet God didn’t give the sparrows any sense of awareness of Him. Humans are the only creature that have an awareness of the presence of God. God created human beings to know Him. And despite the terrible effect sin has had on the divine/human relationship, we still have a sense of the divine and feel a need to connect with God. God makes Himself known to us through His word. In scripture God reveals Himself so we would believe that He is and believe He is what He says.

That’s why the word is so important. That’s why the Son of Man sows the good seed of the word. And that’s why it’s so important that we take the word to heart, gladly hear and learn it, ponder it, pray it and believe it. The Psalmist sang, “Your word O Lord is a light to my feet and a lamp to my path.” The word leads us to Jesus in whom God fully reveals Himself as love, forgiveness and life to those who believe.

His word is the most remarkable seed. His word clears rocks and uproot weeds from the human heart. His word creates good soil in the human heart, so that faith can germinate, blossom, grow and produce a bountiful harvest in time and receive a harvest of life in eternity. His word is the most effective weed killer. His word kills weeds in the most amazing, unconventional way; by changing them into wheat.

If you seeded a field to wheat, you would feel disheartened, if it became infested with weeds. The weed that Jesus refers to in this parable is traditionally associated with darnel, which resembles wheat in the early stages. It's also poisonous. You wouldn't want that in your Wheaties. At an early stage weeds can be uprooted or killed with chemicals, but the weed to which Jesus refers cannot be uprooted without harming the wheat. Wouldn't it be great if you had a chemical that could transform the weeds into wheat!

The gospel has that power. It transforms weeds into wheat, bad seed into good seed, sinners into saints, children of wrath in children of the heavenly Father, sons of the evil one, into children of the kingdom. The gospel transforms our hearts by giving us faith in Jesus as Saviour. Hold the word close to your heart. Hear it. Read it. Discuss it. Pray it. Believe it! It is the most powerful weed killer. The gospel of Jesus gives eternal life to all who believe it! In Jesus' Name. Amen