

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (NRSV)

²⁴He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And 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?' ²⁸He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let 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.' "

³⁶Then 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." ³⁷He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

"The enemy . . . the devil"

Passages such as this invariably generate questions about the devil, aka, Satan. Many Christians struggle with the Bible's depiction of Satan (or better, "the satan," *ha-satan* in the Hebrew) and demons in general. Are there really demons? And the corollary – are there really angels? Is Satan genuine, a personal being who actively opposes God and God's purposes? You might find the following from N.T. Wright helpful.

"The Bible is never very precise about the identity of the figure known as 'the satan.' The Hebrew words mean 'the accuser' [as in Job] and at times the satan seems to be a member of YHWH's heavenly council. . . . However, [the Hebrew word] becomes identified variously with the serpent of the Garden of Eden and with the rebellious daystar cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:12-15) and was seen by many Jews as the quasi-personal source of evil standing behind both human wickedness and large-scale injustice, and sometimes operating through semi-independent 'demons.' By Jesus' time, various words were used to denote this figure, including Beelzebub and simply 'the evil one.' Jesus warned his followers against the deceits this figure could perpetrate. His opponents accused him of being in league with the satan, but the early Christians believed that Jesus in fact defeated [the satan] both in his own struggles with temptation (Matthew 4; Luke 4), his exorcisms of demons, and his death (1 Corinthians 2:8; Colossians 2:15). Final victory over this ultimate enemy is thus assured (Revelation 20), though the struggle can still be fierce for Christians (Ephesians 6:10-20)."

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Are we for God or against God? How about our neighbor? Today's parable is, among other things, a cautionary tale about the dangers of putting ourselves in Christ's place.

The farmer goes out and sows his field with good wheat seed. But at night, an enemy of the farmer sneaks into the field and plants weeds among all the wheat. When everything starts to grow, the farmer's workers don't understand how weeds could have gotten into the field. When the farmer tells them an enemy did it, the workers want to go out and weed the fields. But the farmer says no, they are as likely to pull up wheat as weeds. Instead, the farmer instructs the workers that they are to let the fields mature. The weeds will be separated from the wheat at harvest time. The weeds will be burned; the wheat will go into the barn.

Jesus allegorizes the parable for his listeners. Jesus is the farmer.¹ The field is the world – not the church. The wheat are the children of God; the weeds are the children of the devil,

¹The "Son of Man" of verse 37 is one Jesus' favorite ways of referring to himself. It is a reference to Daniel 7, where the Son of Man is the one given dominion over God's creation.

who is the enemy. The harvest is “the end of the age,” at which time the wheat will be resurrected to lasting glory and the weeds will be cast out.

What do you find most intriguing about this parable. What does it tease out of your imagination? Some of the parable is pretty standard fare from Jesus. Humanity is offered a clear choice – for God or against God. And the choice each person makes will have ever lasting consequences.

Yes, that’s the choice. Will we be “children of the kingdom” or “children of the evil one?” But here’s the problem: it is so tempting to begin trying to tell one from the other. To divide the world into Christians and non-Christians. I see this played out on television and in print by preachers and teachers who ought to know better. Even a casual stroll in the blogosphere turns up way too many self-identifying Christians who are convinced that they can identify the “real” Christians.

But the truth is that, when we are honest with ourselves, we have enough trouble sorting this out for ourselves, much less making judgments about someone else. The farmer in the parable wisely restrains his workers from going out to the field to pull up the weeds. The farmer knows that they won’t be able to tell the wheat from the weeds, so he tells them to be patient. Wait for the harvest. Leave the separating for the end. Leave it to God.

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What we might call “spiritual beings,” whether loyal to God or rebellious, are woven throughout the biblical narratives. So much so that the great 20th-century German theologian, Karl Barth, was led to say that “to deny the angels of God is to deny God.” In the biblical view, reality is much larger than the world we see and touch each day. In one of his best books, Philip Yancey sees in this world, “rumors of another world.” The things of this other world may be unseen but that does not make them unreal.

For much of my life, my theology had little room for Satan, demons, or anything of the sort. But as the years have rolled by, I’ve come to see that the existence of spiritual beings who work against God’s purposes is as good an explanation of much of what is wrong with this world as any. And I’ve learned that the existence of such beings, loyal and rebellious, is certainly the biblical view of God’s creation. So, yes, I accept the existence of the satan.

Still, I have to remind myself that the existence of Satan does not diminish my own responsibility for my actions. There is no room for “the devil made me do it.” When Satan confronts Jesus in the wilderness, Satan tempts Jesus but he can’t make Jesus do anything. Likewise, *ha-satan* may tempt me away from God and God’s ways, but I am responsible for choosing each day to love God and neighbor, to live so that the image of God within me shines brightly for all to see. And by the grace of God, the Spirit of God empowers and enables me to resist temptations – at least, some of the time!

To make matters more complicated, many of those who are wheat now were once weeds. In my own case, I’m pretty sure I was once a weed, though I would have told you then that I was wheat. I’m really hoping that I’m truly wheat now, but if I think I was wrong before, well . . . but perhaps I was just a weak wheat plant back then . . . or better yet, I can just leave it all to God.

Don’t misunderstand me. God expects us to learn what sin is and do our best to avoid it, to love God and to love neighbor. What we believe is true about God and ourselves really matters. We are to defend the apostolic faith, albeit with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:16).

But we cannot go so far as to imagine that we can judge the quality of another person’s relationship with God. Only God knows – now and at the end of the ages. If you ever doubt this to be so, remember the story of David, God’s great king, the man after God’s own heart, the man with whom God made an everlasting covenant. David, despite his long and intense relationship with God, violated Bathsheba and then murdered her husband after she turned up pregnant. I imagine that most of the farmer’s workers would have pulled David out of the ground, figuring that only a weed could do such a thing.

This is one of those parables around which one could build a whole sermon series. But, today, I hear a cautionary tale about our human tendency to pass judgment on other people, to imagine that we really *know* who is a Christian and who is not, who is wheat and who is a weed.

The truth is that we are not equipped to make such judgments. We underestimate how much our own sinfulness warps and reshapes our view of the world, of other people, and even of God. We need to hear Jesus clearly – these matters, such as judging who is a child of God’s kingdom and who is not, are, thankfully, to be left to him.

Interpreting the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

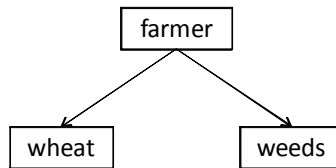
By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are five questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better. In this text box, we'll step through these questions for each parable in this series.

What is the narrative context of the parable?

- This parable follows directly on the heels of the Parable of the Sower and is followed by three brief parables about the truth and value of God's kingdom, even if it can't be seen or is unappreciated. At the end of chapter 13, Jesus encounters hostility in his hometown. This parable and the others are meant to encourage and guide the disciples as Jesus' kingdom movement begins to run into discouragement, resistance, and outright opponents.

What is the parable's structure?

- The servants who work the fields are not a main character, but simply a story-telling device to enable the parable's dialog. Notice that they are not referred to in Jesus' explanation of the parable.



What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?

- Jesus probably had in mind a troublesome weed in the region that looks very much like wheat, especially when it is young.

What is the perspective of each of the main characters (in Jesus' explanation)?

- The farmer is Jesus (the Son of Man) who urges patience, knowing well that we can't really tell who are children of the kingdom and who are not.
- The wheat are Jesus' disciples who live in the world today, amidst the weeds, but upon the consummation of God's kingdom, will be resurrected, shining like the sun.
- The weeds are those who reject Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom and, therefore, cannot participate in the kingdom. Jesus' metaphorical images of judgment can be pretty scary. But do they not drive home the important and lasting consequences of choosing either for or against God? Is there not much evil in this world that we expect God to condemn?

With whom in the story did the first hearers identify?

- This parable, like the others so far in this series, forces the listener to ask a question. In this case, "Am I wheat or am I a weed?"

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The church, the body of Christ, must live in the world yet set apart from it. And this church is comprised of all those, living and dead, who have placed their faith, their trust, in Jesus Christ. Clearly, it is important that we know who are those believers (the "faith-ers") . . . right?! . . . it just has to be important . . .

Maybe not. In today's parable, Jesus tells his disciples that they aren't to try and separate the weeds from the wheat, for they are as likely to uproot one as the other. Why do you think that Jesus teaches such patience and caution? What human tendencies might Jesus be trying to combat? What actions do Christians and Christian churches take in trying to keep the seed pure? What does it say about our tendency to make lists of rules? To enforce doctrinal purity?

Of course, how we live matters a great deal. Are we living in God's way or our own? Doctrine certainly matters. It defines the faith and we are taught to defend it. Discuss the cautions that this parable sets before us when we come to these matters. How can we guide ourselves and others toward Christ-like living and the truth of the Good News, and yet not make the mistake of trying to separate the wheat from the weeds?