



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Exploring Matthew: The chore of weeding

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Matthew 13:24-30

24 Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. **25** But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. **26** When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. **27** "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?' **28** " 'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' **29** " 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. **30** Let 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.' "

In the final of this brief series of four addresses in Matthew's Gospel, we find ourselves once again in the Thirteenth Chapter. In the Parable of the Soils, all the seed was good seed, sown by a good sower, but now we encounter two different kinds of seed, sown by those at opposite ends of the scale – the good and bad sowers.

An important distinction on this occasion is that the seed does not represent faith, but merely those who are early followers or in application disciples today.

If the first parable invites a response and presses the question 'Where do you stand?' the second is wrestling with the profound and challenging issue of why there is evil in the best of situations. This is something we are all confronted with if we are serious about our discipleship, particularly as we ask ourselves the questions:

- Isn't the kingdom of God about good things and good people?
- Why is the response so mixed?

That is the problem in any and every local setting, whether in the first century, when this parable of the chore of weeding was first heard, or in our contemporary settings.

Some people have an idyllic view of the church as it used to be, and yet the intertwining of good and bad, right and wrong, decent and the best even passes through the heart of every local community of faith. We cannot externalise the problem and disclaim personal liability.

The parables of Jesus disclose new truth which cannot simply be reduced to statements or conclusions. Generally they are more than allegories and they can and do disturb. We must be careful not to domesticate their message.

Once again Jesus uses the agricultural setting as a way of communicating a deep spiritual truth. Many of us live in cities. This is especially true in Australia, but I am grateful that we

have viewers in rural areas who keep in touch with us from all around our country. I have often thought that people who live and work on the land are better connected to understand the teaching of Jesus, for so many of his stories and his lessons for life are from such settings.

In cities we may be less dependent upon what we ourselves grow, but the interest in horticulture has probably never been higher.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was speaking at an early Saturday morning Prayer Breakfast at one of our Baptist churches out of the city. On such journeys, I invariably listen to my mate Simon Marnie on the ABC. On that particular Saturday, they were discussing cyclamens and one caller reminded the listeners of the old saying that you should 'put out the cyclamen with the cat'. This is all interesting stuff, but there is rarely a program of this kind that doesn't raise an issue about weeds.

In the garden we have to be very careful about the growth of weeds. If they are not dug out, then the reality is that they will not be annuals but a perennial nuisance, putting at risk all your best plans for the garden.

This particular parable can be linked to the later parable of the dragnet. One comes from the farm and one from the world of fishing. I focus on the first which concentrates on the problem of weeds.

There are always challenges when dealing with the parables and particularly if you get too intense about the details and try to relate them to our own practices today.

I find it most helpful to consider the parable in the light of the fact that Jesus is teaching the disciples during the early part of his ministry – and at a point when the disciples themselves may be perplexed that not everyone is following him and religious leaders are beginning to oppose him.

Some people have wrongly interpreted the parable solely in terms of the church and how true and false believers coexist until the final judgement. The issue for me is settled by Michael Green who reflects upon the gospel in terms of our mission: "But this will not do, for two reasons. For one thing, the problem of nominal Christianity did not yet exist, and for another we are told explicitly that 'the field is the world' (v.38)."

I am always seeking a way of communicating a parable in a manner that makes sense to the modern reader, but without taking away its ability to disturb then and now! We might say that amidst all the excitement of following Jesus, it is too easy to become impatient. We may cry 'Why doesn't everyone believe?' or 'Why doesn't everyone seek the same values that build for a better world?' Perhaps we will have to wait until the ultimate vision of God's kingdom reaches eternity.

At the outset of these addresses, I pointed to some of the characteristics of Matthew and one aspect that captures all of his thinking has to be the way he presents the ministry of Jesus and his teaching in such a practical way.

Matthew deals with all the human problems which confront both people and communities. We read about anger, hypocrisy, tax and the power of possessions. We may not like what he has to say as he presents the teaching of Jesus, but we cannot avoid the challenge that every one of us must face if we are to become serious in the business of following the Christian way.

This parable deals with the weeds that caused such a nuisance. Jesus recounted how a man sowed good seed in his field. During the night hours, one who was an enemy came along and sowed bad seed among his wheat. When the wheat sprouted, likewise the weeds also appeared. Those who worked in the field for the farmer were in a quandary as to what to do. They may well have been tempted to take swift action, make a quick visit to the garden centre to find some weed killer that would eradicate the weeds but retain the plants. Always be wary of such products because they can kill both!

The advice of the farmer made good common sense:

“Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: first collect the weeds and then tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” (Matthew 13:30)

LIFE CAN BE FAR FROM ATTRACTIVE

One of the challenges that all Christians face is that of ensuring that we have a realistic view of the world around us – and for that matter a realistic view of ourselves.

How many recall the quaint words that you will often see in a garden centre – “One is nearer to God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth”? Dorothy Frances Gurney’s words are charming, but just not true for everyone. For so many of us life is not like that; we have an amazing propensity to grow weeds. In fact we get quite comfortable with them.

In acknowledging this, we see the relevance of what Jesus was saying. One lesson from our parable could be that the presence of weeds should not prevent us from sowing seed, any more than it prevented Jesus, who told the parable. (v.v. 24 and 37).

Notice the transitional nature of v.36. Matthew has gathered these parables together for us, but it was necessary for the disciples to understand this particular parable. The reader is invited into the house to ‘overhear’ the explanation of Jesus Christ. The focus is clearly the coming judgement of God and that we may not understand now, but will do in God’s time.

It is true both in the Christian community and in the world around us that there are aspects of life which are far from attractive. We must face the fact that there are far too many weeds growing in our own back gardens. We might wish it were better, but there it is – and in God’s good grace we seek to live the life of Christ and long for his fruit to be seen in our lives amidst all the painful presence of weeds!

Bishop J C Ryle was one of the great Anglican holiness preachers and he wrote so effectively on the theme: “The ways, and fashions, and amusements, and recreations of the world have a continually decreasing place in the heart of the growing Christian. He does not condemn them as downright sinful nor say that those who have anything to do with them are going to hell. He only feels that they have a constantly diminishing hold on his own affections and gradually seem smaller and more trifling in his eyes.”

The parable, then, calls us to a realism about our world and about the way we experience life:

- Life is far from beautiful and is frequently marred by hurt, selfishness and greed
- We find it impossible to live creatively when setting ourselves unreachable goals in life
- It is the work of the Spirit of God which makes possible that which is unattainable in ourselves

Walter Bruggemann concluded on this kind of theme, “In the light of the coming judgement, the present is not a time of paralysing nail-biting, but a time of risk, of joyful ventures taken, of discovering what is really valuable, of a boldness not intimidated by the fear of failure, of a persistence in pursuit of the coming reign of God.”

WEEDS GROW WITHOUT A FANFARE

In this parable of Jesus we are told that he spoke of ‘weeds’ that had been sown alongside ‘wheat’. It is important to note that this occurred during the night at a time when nobody would notice what was happening. It would only be later when the weeds sprouted and formed heads that they would be identified – and then it could be said to be too late to do anything about it.

Understanding the farming methods in Israel/Palestine is always helpful as a background to the New Testament. There was a common weed at the time known as ‘bearded darnel’ which became a curse to the farmer. In the early stages it was identical to wheat. However, when both had produced seeds, the two were clearly distinguishable in their appearance and colour.

The temptation for the farmer would be to begin weeding the field too soon – and that would be a foolish mistake because, in doing so, the farmer could destroy a good crop.

If we take this parable seriously, we will grasp the message that, in its early stages, evil can be hard to distinguish from good. It is when the seed itself grows that the distinction can be readily discerned.

Peter Taylor Forsyth was the son of a Scottish postman. He felt the call of God and went to study at Aberdeen University, a great seat of New Testament theology. He eventually travelled to Germany to study further and to work. In the early part of the twentieth century, he became a powerful voice in the Christian world. He once observed, “Unless there is within us that which is above us, we shall soon yield to that which is about us.”

Returning to our practical application of this parable, we note that:

- There are many hostile powers in this world, whose purpose is to destroy the good
- It can be hard to distinguish between good and evil. We must leave God to make the ultimate distinction.

It was another Scottish writer whose assessment of the parable was “So, then, ultimately the parable is two things – it is a warning not to judge people at all, and it is a warning that in the end there comes the judgement of God.”

There is an undeniable link with the parable of the mustard seed which follows (13:31-32). The common link seems to be the power of those things which we do not see; the imperceptible realities of the world.

The Apostle Paul encourages us, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:18)

In his notes on Matthew 13, Douglas Hare pointed out that we must take care in the way we interpret this passage, but that one overriding point was secure and that is “God is at work, even though human eyes may fail to perceive what is happening.”

GOD BRINGS ABOUT A WONDERFUL HARVEST

As we draw to a close, we must not miss the overarching point that Jesus is clearly making – that there is certainly the presence of weeds both in Christian communities and in the world around us, but there will be an ultimate harvest and eventually the two will be separated.

We are often confronted with the sudden ambiguity of the world. Just a few weeks ago, so many of us across the whole world, but perhaps especially in Holland, Malaysia and Australia, were confronted with the horror of the crime resulting in the destruction of Flight MH17. How do you actually come to understand the deep-seated wrong that exists in this world? We see it in Israel/Palestine and in the continual stories of wrong perpetuated on a grand scale. In recent days, events in Iraq and responses to them remind us of this ambiguity.

Although the answer is difficult to conclude, it is a much healthier position to begin the exploration by not expecting the world to be perfect, because it is broken; by not anticipating that human responses are always good, when they are clearly not; and not placing upon God a responsibility that he has given to us.

We may well ask ourselves – Where was God in the mess and ruin of the disaster that occurred in Ukraine? You may search for the answer to such a question and, though difficult, God's grace and love will always be found in:

- The hearts of grieving people
- The lives of those who seek for justice
- The concerns of a world trying to understand

The parable of the weeds clearly establishes that it is God who is the ultimate judge of the world and it is he who will deal with the harvest.

Whenever I preach on the parables, I regularly turn to Joachim Jeremias, whose writings I consider to be among the best on these themes. Whilst writing on the second and related parable in this chapter, he concluded, "Til then, all false zeal must be checked, the fields must be left to ripen in patience, the net must be cast widely, and everything else left to God in faith, til his hour comes."

In concluding this short series, I refer to Michael Green, who pointed out, "Parables are not meant to pat us on the back, but to give us a kick in the pants. There are not intended to comfort us, but to challenge us and change us. Parables speak out against the status quo ... parables are demonstrators waving signs of protest, speaking out against our ways of thinking, our traditional ways of experiencing and obeying God, our spiritual institution."

Weeds do come as a nuisance, but we must remind ourselves it is God who ultimately will deal with the matter.