

# Good Seed?

## On The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

We are more than due for another illustration from my life of running!

I have mentioned before I am a member of the Western District Joggers and Harriers club. We meet on Saturday mornings at 7:30 am. Each Saturday, the club's officers and volunteers organise a different running competition. Two of those competitions are handicapped, the 10 km and the 3.5 km races, meaning each runner starts at a different time, based on their fitness level and capacity, but all runners are meant to finish at the same time, thereby giving every runner a chance to win. For example, I once beat a runner across the line who was far faster than I, but my handicap allowed me to finish before him.



The runners of my running club are a mixed field of runners. There are men and women, boys and girls, who run. There are young and old who run, some in their early teens and some in the low 80s. Some walk and some run. Some run short distances, like the 3.5, and others run longer distances, like 10 km, half marathons, full marathons, and even ultra marathons of up to 100 km.

Every August, the club holds a Best Of The Best competition, where all the winners of each of the monthly competitions compete against each other. One year I had won a 3.5 km race, so I was the back runner of the Best Of The Best at that distance. Included in this race was a walker, who had won his month due to the handicapping system.



Because I was the last to start running, all the other competitors were in front of me. I passed them each, one by one. As I got closer to the finish line, I saw the walker up ahead. As he got closer to the finish line, he started running! In effect, he cheated because he was supposed to be walking!

As I said, my running club is a mixed field of runners. We all support each other in our running and celebrate each other's accomplishments ... except when someone is cheating!

Jesus said, "You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world" (Jn 16:33).<sup>1</sup> This world is like a field with many different seeds planted in it. That will likely feel not very comfortable at times, but we must persist in goodness and righteousness to the end.

## Explanation

### Let The Parable Speak For Itself

Our scripture focus from *The Gospel According to Matthew* is another parable involving seeds. While it uses the same seed-imagery as the Parable of the Sower & Soils we reflected on last week,<sup>2</sup> they should not necessarily be used to directly interpret one another. To do so would skew our understanding in a direction Jesus did not necessarily intend, although that may have been the intention of Matthew.

We discussed this skewing of our understanding last week when we noted Jesus' 'explanation' of The Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:18–23) was a different perspective than his 'original' telling of the parable (Mt 13:1–9). The tendency of Bible readers is to jump ahead to the explanation and understand the parable from that second perspective, which is to miss the first perspective of the original telling.

The parable in today's scripture focus comes immediately after last week's parable. While Matthew did place them one after the other, after all, to form a connection between the two parables, the tendency would be to interpret the second parable in light of the first. Let us not jump to that conclusion, but start by letting this parable speak for itself.

### **A Rare Parable**

Remember how I said last week's parable was rare in that Matthew provided an 'explanation' for it from Jesus? You might think I was lying because here is a second parable with an explanation following!

Jesus told many parables during his ministry. The exact number of parables varies depending on different interpretations and categorisations, but a commonly recognised number is 46 parables. Of those 46, only 3 are explained by Jesus: The Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3–9, 18–23), The Parable of The Net (Mt 13:47–50), and our scripture focus, The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (Mt 13:24–30, 36–43).<sup>3</sup> It must mean something that all those rare parables are found in the 13th chapter of *The Gospel According to Matthew*.

A little more free trivia for you: Only The Parable of the Sower and The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds are given titles by Jesus.

The parable of our scripture focus today is a rare parable, like last week's, in that Jesus provided an explanation; however, this parable and its explanation are different from last week's parable because Jesus' explanation is actually an explanation and not a second perspective, as it was last week. The explanation therefore fits its parable.

Allow me to now explain the explanation.

### **Unrealistic Features**

He presented another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. (Matthew 13:24)

While I have freely admitted I am not a farmer nor a gardener, even I can tell there are a number of unrealistic features in this parable:

- the landowner of this parable would not sow the field himself, but would be helped by servants, since he had them;
- the parable implies "people" slept, but the owner did not, since he knew an enemy was at work;
- an enemy was unlikely to sow seed in another's field—it would have been too big a job;
- the servants would not be surprised at weeds in a field; rather, they would be surprised if there were no weeds;
- the weeds would be distinguishable earlier in the process of their growth and normal practice was to take weeds out early;
- the man's servants would have done the harvesting, not a second group of reapers; and,

- the weeds would not have been bundled but left in the field to be burned.

While the circumstances of the parable are on the edge of being realistic, they still fit the first-century context. As the indefatigable Mark Twain is often credited with saying, “Don’t let the facts get in the way of a good story”.<sup>4</sup> These unrealistic features do serve to bolster Jesus’ point; so, we can suspend our disbelief that we might receive and respond to Jesus’ wisdom.

### The Points

The parable of our scripture focus begins with Jesus stating his own intent for sharing the parable. He wanted to help his disciples and the crowd to understand what the kingdom of heaven is like. While this is a topic far bigger than any one parable, he here compares it to a man sowing good seed in his field.

Remember that: **The parable is about the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus then identified himself as “the man” of the parable, but did so by using his favourite title for himself, the Son of Man. This is a title drawn from a prophecy found in *The Book of Daniel* (Dan 7) that describes the One who will ascend to take up a position of authority beside God Almighty, a throne beside the throne. Rather than call himself a king or The King, Jesus preferred to identify himself with The Son of Man of Daniel 7, which is to make a claim to kingship without actually using the word. Those who know will recognise what he was doing; those who want to know will look it up to learn more.

Jesus then identified the “field” of the parable as “the world”. It has always bewildered me when teachers and preachers claim this parable is about the Church. They equate the kingdom of God with the Church of God, but that equation cannot be supported by this parable. Jesus was quite clear the field of this parable is the world. In the field bad seed is sown alongside the good, side by side they grow in the world.

Notice there are two kinds of seeds: “good” and “bad”. The seed does not become good or bad; its quality has already been determined. “How is it determined?” you might be wondering.

In my opinion, the answer is found between our parable and its explanation, the part we did not read.

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables, and he did not tell them anything without a parable (Matthew 13:34)

Between our parable and Jesus’ explanation, Matthew described how, “Jesus told the crowd all these things in parables”. By using parables more often than straight propositional teaching, Jesus intended to spark their interest and so invited them to respond. What was the response he was looking for?

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” (Matthew 13:36)

Jesus spoke in parables to everyone, but taught directly those who wanted to learn more. For example, he explained this parable to his disciples because they asked. They themselves moved from the crowd to being his disciples because they wanted to learn more from him. In fact, they became his disciples through this very process. We read of Jesus’ first disciples,

The two disciples heard [John the Baptist] say this and followed Jesus.  
(John 1:37)

Andrew and another disciple were first disciples of John the Baptist. They heard what John said about Jesus and so asked him, “Where are you staying?” They wanted to hear more from Jesus and learn more from him. Even more than this, Andrew went and found his brother Peter and told him about Jesus (Jn 1:37-42a). He must have known his brother was a seeker.

In following Jesus into the house and asking him for an explanation, after he spoke the parable of our scripture focus, the disciples aligned themselves with the Kingdom and demonstrated the only proper response to hearing his parables and teaching. They were good seed of the Kingdom. They are then planted in the world-field by the Son of Man.

Another point of this parable is the good seed grows in the world alongside the bad seed, which are “the children of the evil one”. This is to say they have given themselves over to sin and so have aligned themselves with the evil one.

Where seed was an image of faith in the previous parable, here it is an image of those who have placed their faith in Jesus and are living a Christian lifestyle. They are learning to love, trust, and obey Jesus, which leads us to the next point that the difference between good and bad seed is demonstrated by the fruit produced. The good seed produced “grain”; only then did the weeds become obvious to the man of the parable. The man-landowner does not have to wait until the reaping to know which is which, but he does delay the reaping **for the sake of the wheat** —whatever that means, at least it is yet another indicator of our Father God’s love and care for his children, the good seed.

The Greek word *zizania* —which is here translated as “weeds”, but as “tares” or “darnel” in other translations— nearly all commentators think this bad seed should be identified as *lolium temulentum*, an annoying weed that looks very much like wheat, especially before maturity. It can carry a poisonous fungus. If it is harvested and ground together with wheat, the resulting flour is spoiled.<sup>5</sup>

While the good seed and the bad seed grow alongside each other, that does not mean they should be mixed. The result is not a little good, it is just all bad! This is seen in how the Church exists in a fallen world and, as a result, the friends of Jesus live and work and play and even worship alongside those who remain in their sin, those who “cause sin/stumbling and [are] guilty of lawlessness”. The friends of Jesus, the “good seed”, need to be mindful of the influence of the “bad seed” on themselves and others, wherever we encounter them.

We can easily avoid the influence of the bad seed, without avoiding the bad seed altogether, when we remember the wheat and the weeds will be “separated” by the reapers, they will be burned in the fire of judgment in the end. The fact they do not produce grain-fruit should be a great big ‘red flag’ in the meantime, yet how often is the good seed destroyed by becoming entangled with the weeds, or at least distracted from its own growth by the lack thereof evident in the weeds. Why should the lack of growth, or the disordered growth, of the bad seed be attractive to anyone when it is so evidently poisonous?

Still tracking with me?

Note it is the angels who do the harvesting and sorting; the good seed does not do this work. If the angel-servants are not going to pull the weeds until the harvest, where they can be separated from the wheat safely, what then should be the attitude of the good seed to the bad?

Too often the friends of Jesus, and their churches, concern themselves with passing judgement on our neighbours for their sinful behaviour and institutions. Those so inclined are confused by what is the “field” of this parable. Is it the Church or the world? The confusion rises perhaps from verse 41, where Jesus interpreted the parable by stating,

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom all who cause sin and those guilty of lawlessness. (Matthew 13:41)

Note the separating and gathering and burning happens at the harvest. Thus, before the final judgement, the Kingdom consists only of the good seed, those who revere our Creator and respect his commands. By the time of the harvest, the Kingdom has extended to the whole earth and the weeds are to be removed because they do not belong.

We can understand this parable then to be describing the world generally at first, and as such it highlights how the friends of Jesus, the good seed, should concern themselves with their own growth and producing their own fruit, rather than being concerned with the immoral attitudes and conduct of the bad seed, even if that bad seed is ‘too close for comfort’, even within the communities and churches shared by the good seed. The bad seed will be destroyed in the end. Its sower has done nothing for it. It was merely a pawn in his machinations.

### **The Summary**

That is my explanation of Jesus’ explanation of The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. That Matthew included this parable in chapter 13, with the other rare parable, tells us something.

Matthew’s design for writing his account of the good news about Jesus is present him as the King of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed One. Matthew’s audience is Jewish people of the first century.

In chapter 12, the religious leaders formally rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Chapter 13 then starts to describe the consequences of rejecting Jesus.

The use of seed as an image changes in this chapter. In The Parable of the Sower, which begins this chapter, the seed represents the good news of God sown by the sower that either dies or produces fruit. We are reminded that Jesus is sowing the good news about God and it will produce an extraordinary harvest.

In Jesus’ explanation of that parable, the seed is planted in soil which represents a person’s faith or lack thereof. We encouraged to ask what kind of soil are we. Will we respond to the good news or not? Will we respond and produce fruit, or will our faith wither before it can mature?

Finally, in The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, the good seed is planted in the world alongside bad seed. One will grow to produce fruit and the other will not. One will become included in the harvest that is the kingdom of God, the other will be separated from the harvest and burned in the fire.

With this chapter and these parables, Matthew was trying to help his readers understand we can respond to the good news about Jesus and have it produce fruit in our life, such that we join the ultimately victorious Kingdom, despite living and growing beside bad seed, or we can reject the good news, grow in the world but not mature, nor produce fruit, and ultimately be destroyed in the fires of judgment.

## Application

That is a lot of points to cover, for there is a lot in this parable and chapter. It truly is a high point of Jesus' teaching. We will cover a little more of it next week.

When we take the time to reflect more deeply on the parable of our scripture focus, we can see Jesus had many points to make. His points are not confusing if we track the usage of the various images rather than project into them. Jesus' own explanation makes his use of these images very clear!

My explanation is not a radical interpretation of the parable. What is radical is when we adopt the attitude of the landowner's servants and want to rip out the weeds around us in the field. It seems a reasonable response to the identifiable weeds around us, but this is dangerous for the Church.

Remember, the field is the world and the kingdom of God is the good seed sown in the world. Under the care of the triune God, that good seed will grow to maturity, produce fruit, and overwhelm the bad seed rather than the other way around. At the harvest, the bad seed, sown by the Evil One, will not produce anything good and so will be destroyed. It is not the job of the Church to destroy the weeds in the meantime or ever!

The friends of Jesus have homes, clubs, teams, schools, workplaces, and third places where we mix and mingle with those still in their fallenness, who have given themselves over to sin. We suffer at the hand of sinners and their sinful institutions, but frankly, so do they. Until the Kingdom wins out, and it will, the field is muddy and the world seems an unpleasant and unfruitful place to be.



Except it is not! We are cared for by the Gardener; the bad seed is not. Our concern is to grow and be fruitful, not to condemn and criticise.

In local churches those not involved in ministry become consumed by “administry” —a term I first heard from Pastor Rick Warren. Administry is a fixation on small details of administration as the end, rather than the means. They fixate on administration and rules rather than the mission and ministry to which a local church has been called. The question is why are they not involved in ministry? Is it because they are not developed for ministry? Is it because they are not invited to engage in ministry? Are they are not interested because of a lack of intrinsic faith? Are they are more interested in ‘stirring the pot’ and causing trouble?

Whatever the reason, the friends of Jesus are not to match the condemnation and criticism of the weeds with more condemnation and criticism, but to uphold the value of the mission and ministry, and persist in that focus!

Similarly, the friends of Jesus are not to ‘judge’ the “weeds” of the world, but leave that to the final Judgment. Ours is not to condemn and criticise those who do not uphold the values of the Kingdom. We cannot hold them to a standard they have no interest in following. We can, however, encourage those around us and shape the systems and institutions of this world through our active engagement and promotion of Kingdom values.

Let me give you a quick example: The Robodebt scandal in Australia refers to a controversial automated debt recovery system implemented by the Australian government. The system used data-matching technology to calculate and recover overpayments of welfare benefits from individuals. However, it was found that the system was flawed, resulting in wrongful debt notices being issued to many individuals.



The scandal involved allegations of unfairness, inadequate evidence, and a lack of human oversight in the debt recovery process. As a result, the government faced significant criticism and legal challenges, leading to changes in the system and compensation for affected individuals.<sup>6</sup>

What bothers me most about this scandal is that the Robodebt program was initiated during the tenure of the former Prime Minister Scott Morrison when he was the Minister for Social Services in 2016. Whether the program was legal is of little importance compared to the sheer fact it was a deleterious program. It may have been politically expedient, but it was morally reprehensible. Morrison is a public Christian and the responsibility for the design and implementation of the Robodebt program primarily lies with the relevant government agencies and departments. There is no way Morrison did not know about and sanction the program.

Was he acting like wheat or like a weed in that case?

The Kingdom will win in the end; the harvest will be collected. When wheat acts like a weed, it has in effect become a weed because it is no longer producing fruit. Whether you are a politician, a doctor, a non-profit executive, a plumber, a mechanic, a pastor, a child care worker, a caregiver, a student, or you work at McDonald's; whether you are in your home, your school, your workplace, hanging out with your friends, on the beach, or around a bonfire, the friends of Jesus are good seed because we produce fruit, grain that feeds others and produces more wheat. We have and make a positive impact in the lives around us because we promote and exemplify the values of the Kingdom. We are good seed because everything we do is intended to glorify God and to follow the Way of Love. Any other motivations make us unproductive and turn us into weeds.

The wheat must grow up alongside the weeds and be diligent to not turn into weeds in the meantime by remaining separate not by proximity, but separate by faith and lifestyle.

## Conclusion

When you read the stories and teachings of Jesus, respond to it by seeking to learn more and better. Conform your life to what you learn from him and in community with others seeking his wisdom and salvation.

As you live in the world, commit yourself to growing and maturing and producing fruit. Do not be concerned at the fallenness and sin and destruction around you for that is of the Evil One. He and his seed are destined for the fires of judgment.

This world is like a field with many different seeds planted in it. That will likely feel not very comfortable at times, but we must persist in goodness and righteousness to the end.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Ian Forest-Jones, "Parable Of The Soil", 16-Jul-2023, <https://replug.link/ec046170> (accessed 22-Jul-2023).
- 3 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), pg 145.
- 4 It is important to note that the exact origin of this expression is difficult to trace and there are variations of it that predate Twain.
- 5 Ibid, pg 198.
- 6 Paul Karp, "Scott Morrison rejects robodebt royal commission findings but won't say if he was referred for prosecution", The Guardian, 7-Jul-2023, <https://replug.link/9420c370> (accessed 22-Jul-2023).