

The Odyssey of Theodicy

Or, Is That a Weed?

July 19, 2026

Genesis 28:10-19a

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Today's passage from Matthew comes from the second of the seven parables in Matthew 13. Last week, we heard the first and most popular one of the seven, the Parable of the Four Soils. Here, we have the Parable of the Weeds, or the Weeds Among the Wheat. The parables in the gospels have such beauty and carry such meaning within them, and they can be some of the most memorable words of Jesus' ministry. It is helpful to remind ourselves what the parables seek to do and, just as important, what they do not seek to do. To that end, I came across a quote from C.S. Lewis this week and I found its prose to be quite beautiful.

"It is perhaps idle to speak here of spirit and letter. There is almost no 'letter' in the words of Jesus. Taken by a literalist, He will always prove the most elusive of teachers. Systems cannot keep up with that darting illumination. No net less wide than a man's whole heart, nor less fine of mesh than love, will hold the sacred Fish." C.S. Lewis - *Reflections on the Psalms*

When we consider how scripture in the Bible came to be scripture, we know that most of it did not start with the written word. It is first read aloud from mind and memory, first received by the ear, wrestled with and prayed over, before eventually it is decided that this cannot be lost to time over the generations – this must be written down. And so the Gospel of Matthew came to be in the midst of a very strong Jewish community of people who also were followers of Jesus and what was then known as "the way." They were wrestling with what Jesus' life and words meant in light of the lived realities before them. In the case of this parable, they were struggling with how people in their church community could hear God's word but not live out the word's ethical instructions. Why were some not walking the walk? And beyond their own community's sphere, how could some have known Jesus, heard Jesus, experienced Jesus and the amazing works that were happening in his name, and *not* been transformed? We wonder the same things today, we just have 2,000 years of history to numb us to the harsh reality of people turning away rather than turning back.

If we were to give a critical eye to the story to see how it makes sense, we might ask questions like:

- If the householder who sows the seed put out good seed but his people are worried he put out seed that was not good, what was the Home Depot/Tractor Supply equivalent back then? “Sir, did you not go to Dorothea for the good seed? You didn’t go to Joe’s questionable seed stand at the end of the market, did you?”
- Where is the security on this property? Everyone’s asleep, no one is keeping watch, and the devil is just allowed to dance in the field by the pale moonlight, sowing his questionable seed that he got from Joe?
- But perhaps the most reasonable question we might ask – a reasonable question that also points to some symbolic meaning in the story – is why the Sower gives the instructions he gives. Normally, you’d weed out the field as soon as you could, before it was ready for harvest, so that the weeds don’t mess with the resources and nutrients of the desirable plants. But no, he says not to do that. Or, at the harvest, you’d gather up the crops first and then deal with whatever’s left in an easier, less labor-intensive fashion. But no, he says not to do that either; the weeds will be gathered up first, set aside, and then the wheat.

We know we can’t read the parables literally, although it is fun to ask practical questions of them sometimes. But this is where one important detail emerges to help make sense of some of the strangeness. The weed in question, apparently, is called “darnel”. Darnel is not awesome. In addition to being poisonous, for most of its lifespan, it looks remarkably similar to wheat – in color, general shape, growth pattern, etc. It isn’t until the end, when it is fully grown and ready for harvest, that it is easily distinguished from wheat because wheat droops at the top under the burden of its fruitfulness and darnel stands tall, having borne no fruit. Add to this the fact that, like many weeds that are good at their job, it has wrapped its roots around the wheat around it so that you do indeed hurt the other plants when you pull it up. It’s maddening, but there is practical wisdom in what the master of the household says to instruct his people.

The point of the story is to remind us to trust in God’s sovereignty, judgment, and justice. For Matthew’s community and for us, we should let God do God’s thing – let God cook, as the youths might say – and not overreact. You could say this parable is a great argument against capital punishment, but I think there are softer messages here, too. Don’t ostracize, exclude, show unkindness to, or be unloving towards others just because you think they might be a weed in the field of life and you’re wheat. Let God take care of it at the harvest, and in the meantime do the best you can with whatever plants are around you.

That’s all fine and good, but I want to go a step further.

This parable has elements of a theodicy. The best definition of theodicy I found is “an answer to the question of why God permits evil.” In the Bible, Job is the classic example of a theodicy, but we see scripture grappling with the question in many places. And across history, the question becomes more important and the answers more vital at certain times.

Ok, so that is one of the things this parable is seeking to do: the help make sense of how people can turn away from God even when brought face to face with God. But the next step that's important to take -- lest we all think that we are wheat and the people we don't care for are weeds, the next step is to acknowledge that weeds are people too! And doesn't God love all people? The story presumes a classical interpretation of predestination that we generally reject: that some seeds are sown as weeds from the beginning with no hope of redemption; that some people are born damned from the beginning with no hope of salvation.

Where is the agency of the plants in the field? What about our capacity to change, to be penitent, to grow in faith and godly character and love *towards* perfection in Christ? What about our ability to change our soil from rocky or thorny and receive God's word so that it grows in the world as God intended? And to go in the other direction with it: What Matthew calls the evil one I call free will and the ability to hear something good, know that something is good, know the difference between the good and the bad (and the ugly) --- and to turn away from the good, to choose -- in keeping with the image of the parable -- to be a poisonous weed rather than a useful, nutritious wheat.

The broad definition of 'weed' that I love -- and that our son, Elias, loved when he was very young -- is “a plant that is not valued where it is growing and is usually of vigorous growth.” When Elias was 3 or 4 years old right after we had moved into our home here, he was learning about plants at daycare or school and came to care very deeply about all plants. One day, he came outside to find a pile of weeds I had made from pulling them out in our garden. It came as a surprise to me when there was suddenly great wailing and gnashing of teeth at the sight of so many uprooted plants, all of which should have stayed where God intended them to be. Next thing I knew, he was placing them back in the ground, root-side down, in order to replant them and allow them to live. With the heart of that child, there were no weeds, only plants created by God whose existence mattered.

What if, with God, there are no weeds? What if we see the people-that-might-be-weeds around us differently? What if they have value, too? And not just to us, but to God and God's sovereignty since it will be his harvest one day.

The original message of this parable had a very important but limited meaning for Matthew's community. But this is the same gospel that brings us the Sermon on the Mount, the Great Commission, and the Greatest Commandments, all of which broaden God's love to all people – not limit it to just a few. We are called to see the face of God in everyone we meet and to love all the people around us with the heart of a child, not just because God has told us to and we are good little drones, but because we trust in God's sovereignty and justice and love. And we are called to love and serve God above all by loving and serving one another. So yes, we will let God cook, and trust in his love and goodness. Amen.